Exploring communication in international workplaces in Ho Chi Minh City: a grounded theory study

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Exploring communication in international workplaces in Ho Chi Minh City:
A grounded theory study

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DECLARATION

I certify that the work presented in this thesis, to the best of my knowledge and belief, is original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University’s rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research award and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University.

…………………………………
Adrian Wee
June 2015
I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to all the people who have supported me in pursuing this doctorate. Without their support, I would never have been able to complete this arduous task. First, I would like to thank Dr. John and Professor Selvanathan for guiding me through the thesis process and for providing their insights into my work. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Phil Smith, my work manager, who understood the demands of the doctorate and granted me much time and space to pursue it.

Next, I would like to thank my family members who have helped make this doctorate possible for me. I would like to thank my parents who never gave up on me. I would also like to thank my sister who was always ready to provide encouragement as I plodded through my thesis. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Tran, and my son, Matthew, for their understanding and for their many sacrifices. There were so many days and nights when I was away from them so that I could write my dissertation. Last but not least, I would like to express thanks and appreciation to the many participants, both managers and employees, who generously shared their experiences with me and allowed me to learn so much from them.

I thank you all so very much.
ABSTRACT

This study explores in depth, with a sample of foreign managers and local Vietnamese employees, their experiences of communication at work. The purpose is to examine what they perceived to be issues or concerns when communicating with each other at work. This study also develops a theory based on the findings to better explain the situation under investigation. This study selected a sample of 19 foreign managers and 19 local employees from seven Anglo-based companies operating in the service sector such as accounting, banking and advertising, in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. The primary data collection method was the semi-structured individual interviews. Complementing the individual interviews were focus group discussions with managers and employees who did not take part in the individual interviews.

The interview data was collected and analysed using the qualitative grounded theory method. The collected data was coded and subsequently organised according to themes or categories. The categories generated corresponded with the categories of extant literature reviewed, namely culture, communication and leadership. The managers and employees were generally concerned with the different aspects of work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language use at work. The managers focused on work independence and involvement, proactive communication including feedback and language proficiency. The employees focused on close and supportive relationships, respectful and empathetic communication particularly listening, and language clarity.

By integrating the categories, a model was developed depicting misunderstandings occurring in the international workplaces. The model describes how the different and oftentimes opposing concerns and expectations of work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language held by managers and employees can often contribute to misunderstandings at work. Exacerbating the situation further are the different cultural background and training of the managers and employees. Cultural beliefs and education serve to polarise rather than moderate expectations of behaviours, making for a more volatile situation. The findings of this study revealed that the misunderstandings can negatively affect employee morale and work performance. Consequently it concludes with several recommendations for practice for the managers and their employees.

Keywords: culture, communication, leadership, qualitative, grounded theory, Vietnam
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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study explores the workplace communication of foreign managers and local employees in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. The purpose is to examine what they perceived to be problems or concerns when communicating at work. It is anticipated that insights and knowledge gained from this exploratory study will assist in the development of more relevant work practices to facilitate communication and better work performance. The researcher employed the qualitative grounded theory approach. Participants in this study were 19 foreign managers and 19 local Vietnamese employees working in seven Anglo-based service companies in HCMC. That is, all the companies have their headquarters in England, Australia or the United States, and were operating in the service sectors of accounting, advertising and banking.

Chapter One has nine main sections. It begins with a background to the study. This is followed by discussion of the research problem, the research questions, the research objectives and the rationale for the study. The methodology is briefly outlined next. The chapter concludes with definitions for some of the terms used, and an overview of the thesis. The structure of Chapter 1 is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

1.2 Background to the study

In the last decade, Vietnam has been a magnet for foreign investment. At its peak, Vietnam was regarded by savvy investors as one of the most attractive new investment destinations (Rowley & Truong 2009). As a consequence, registered foreign direct investments rose quickly from US$3.2b in 2003 to more than US$21.5b in 2009 (EIU 2013). One reason for the large influx of foreign direct investments is production cost. Vietnam’s manufacturing sector, including garment, textiles and footwear enjoyed lower production costs than its neighbors such as China or Thailand (Nguyen & Robinson 2010). Another reason is Vietnam’s rapidly growing economy. From 1995 to 2011, gross domestic product in Vietnam registered an impressive 7 percent growth annually (World Bank 2013). Various businesses, recognizing the many opportunities of a fast growing economy, directed investments there.
1.1 Introduction

1.2 Background to the study

1.3 Research problem

1.4 Research questions

1.5 Unit of analysis

1.6 Justification for the study

1.7 Research methodology

1.8 Definition of key terms

1.9 Thesis overview

Source: Developed for this research study
In 2012 and 2013, however, economic growth in Vietnam slowed to 5 percent. The slower growth was the result of weak demand for consumer goods caused by global economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, economic growth in Vietnam was expected to rebound to 6.8 percent in 2015, once the global economy and the global demand for goods had recovered (EIU2013).

The rapid economic growth in Vietnam, in turn, can be attributed to the government's commitment to economic reforms. In 1986, after years of abysmal economic growth and high inflation, the socialist government decided to implement doi moi. Doi moi was an economic renovation program aimed at stimulating economic growth. Doi moi was also the first in a number of initiatives taken by the state to slowly move the economy from a centrally planned, command economy to a market economy with socialist characteristics (Rowley & Truong 2009; Zhu 2003). Several initiatives taken as a result of doi moi include the opening up of domestic trade to competition, encouraging the development of private enterprises, reducing the government’s involvement in the economy, and attracting foreign direct investments. The government’s economic reforms were given a further boost in 2007, with the country joining the World Trade Organisation.

The rapid economic growth in Vietnam has also attracted large international companies operating in the service sectors such as ANZ Bank, Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Deloitte, KPMG, and Prudential. These companies, which were considered a rarity just a decade ago, brought in not only international practices, but also international personnel. Due to a myriad of factors, including the lack of local management talent, these companies introduced managers of different nationalities to work with the local Vietnamese employees. Foreign managers were sought because the local managers, on account of their lack of exposure or training, often had limited knowledge and expertise on international business practices (Montague 2013; Nguyen & Robinson 2010). Rowley and Truong (2009), citing local government sources, noted that there were 40,000 to 50,000 foreign employees working in international and local companies in Vietnam in 2008, with nearly a third of them being management personnel.

The foreign companies’ entry was generally welcomed by the local labour market. They created much needed employment for local university graduates. Where previously graduates only had to contend with large state owned enterprises (SOE) or small to medium sized, privately owned enterprises (POE), now they had an enticing foreign alternative.
Nonetheless, the arrival of large numbers of foreign companies also presented the local labour market with a number of issues. Chief among them was the surging demand for industry-ready graduates, or graduates that fitted into the international working environment.

Recent reports suggest that the demand for these graduates may have overwhelmed supply. Rowley and Truong (2009), the World Bank (2013) and Montague (2013), for example, noted a considerable deficit in labour supply as compared with labour demand, especially at the higher end of the market. They further argue that the deficit in labour in both quantity and quality, if not addressed quickly, threatens to undermine Vietnam’s future economic growth.

Reflecting this deficit, numerous calls have been made by foreign firms to the authorities concerned to produce more graduates that better match industry needs. Many of them have voiced concerns over the new graduates’ lack of skills and experience, and the additional expenses they invariably incur in training them (Duoc & Metzger 2007). The purported lack of skills and experience covers many areas but they invariably include the new graduates’ ability or inability to communicate with foreign managers (World Bank 2012, 2013).

Several studies have indicated communication as a key concern. Trung and Swierczek (2009), for instance, surveyed 251 managers in state owned (SOE) and foreign owned enterprises (FOE) and found the employees’ ability to communicate to be a key issue. Among other concerns, the managers desired their employees to be able to work in teams, to solve problems and to communicate more effectively. The World Bank (2012, 2013), citing several survey studies conducted locally, including those by MOLISA or the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs, similarly found communication and language problems to be a key concern that foreign managers in Vietnam typically faced.

1.3 Research problem

The aim of this study was to explore workplace communication experiences of a group of foreign managers and local employees in seven Anglo-based companies in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). As mentioned, all the companies had their headquarters in England, Australia or the United States, and were operating in the accounting, advertising and banking sectors. This study focused on what they perceived to be problems or concerns when communicating at work, and how they resolved those concerns. Various studies conducted in Vietnam point to workplace communication as a key concern in foreign owned companies (World Bank 2012, 2013).
Nonetheless, very few studies have been done, particularly in Vietnam, on exactly what those concerns are, why or how they are concerns, and how they can be addressed.

The general research problem guiding this study is:

How can the communication problems or concerns in international workplaces in HCMC be managed?

1.4 Research questions and objectives

To address the research problem, the following research questions have guided this study:

1. What do the foreign managers and local employees perceive as problems or concerns when communicating at work?
2. What did they do to address their problems or concerns?
3. What are the implications for practice?

This study also encompassed the following aims:

1. To provide detailed accounts of the participants’ views in order to facilitate deeper understanding of the research situation.
2. To develop theory that explains the research situation.
3. To generate work practices to better address the issues and concerns.

With its emphasis on understanding, this study aimed to provide detailed descriptions of the participants’ experiences. ‘Thick description’ of a research situation, though arduous to achieve, facilitates insight and understanding (Geertz 1973). This study also aimed to generate a theory to better explain the situation on the ground. Though the theory generated would be very specific to the situation under investigation, it would nevertheless form the basis for a more formal theory.

The attention on service companies with their headquarters in ‘Anglo’ countries such as England, Australia and the United States, was based on the idea that there would be greater interaction between managers and employees in those companies, and hence greater potential for communication issues to emerge.
The focus on ‘Anglo’ companies was because initial investigations suggested that Vietnamese employees who adhere to ‘East Asian’ values and cultural practices attach very different meanings to their communication experiences at work than their managers, who subscribe to the ‘Anglo’ ways of thinking and doing things.

1.5 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis can be an individual, a group of individuals or an organisation (Neuman 2007). The unit of analysis for this study was the individual managers and employees working in Anglo-based companies operating in the financial and services sector. This aligns with the focus of this study, which was to explore the participants’ perceptions of problems, issues and concerns when communicating at work. On the one hand, foreign managers of various nationalities are raised to adopt the ‘Anglo’ set of cultural values and work practices, and on the other, local employees are raised to embrace a very different East Asian set of values and practices.

1.6 Justification for the study

As previously indicated, a number of survey studies have already been conducted in Vietnam on the local labour market. In the main, they point to a labour force that has issues or concerns with regards to teamwork, problem solving and communication (Montague 2013; Trung & Swierczek 2009; World Bank 2012). Nonetheless, no in-depth study as such has been done on communication in Vietnam, specifically with regards to issues or concerns in international workplaces, how and why they are concerns, and how the concerns can be addressed.

This study addresses this deficit. It closely examines workplace communication at seven Anglo-based service companies in HCMC. In particular, it identifies what are perceived as issues, problems or concerns from both the foreign managers’ and the local employees’ perspectives. With managers and employees coming from very different cultural backgrounds and training, namely Anglo on the part of the managers and the Far East on the part of the employees, there is a real need to examine both perspectives. The focus of this study was not just on examining and describing the participants’ experiences, but also on developing theory that could help explain the situation under investigation. This theory in turn would help the researcher to better understand the research situation, and develop strategies to address the identified concerns.
A similar, if somewhat brief, exploratory study on communication issues or problems in the manufacturing sector has been made in Thailand (Sriussadaporn, 2006). A study on Vietnam, however, is needed because of the very different political, economic and social systems in place. Unlike Thailand, which has been a long-time adherent of the market economy, Vietnam has until recently been a fervent supporter of socialism and the planned economy. Also, unlike Thai society which closely adheres to Buddhism, Vietnamese society is influenced very much by Confucian teachings (Truong 2013; Zhu 2003). These very different influences will invariably impact what and how people communicate, and importantly, how they give meaning to their communication experiences. Further, this study focused on the service sector which the World Bank (2012, 2013) noted is more susceptible to higher levels of expectations on the employees’ ability to work and communicate with each other.

The need for this study has been made more pressing with Vietnam’s sustained economic growth and the relentless influx of foreign companies. As explained earlier, many foreign employers in HCMC have expressed concerns over the difficulties they faced finding industry-ready recruits. Their concerns are set to increase with more companies entering the already tight labour market for graduates that readily fit industry needs.

1.7 Research methodology

This study was conducted using the grounded theory approach. According to Creswell (2007, p. 63) ‘the grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon.’ For this study, the grounded theory approach was considered suitable because:

- This study focused on the meaning the participants attached to their communication experiences at work, which is in line with the grounded theory constructivist orientation that assumes reality is socially constructed (Healy & Perry 2000).

- It affords the researcher a well-structured approach to analyse qualitative data. Grounded theory provides a comprehensive set of guidelines to help the novice researcher conduct research successfully (Denzin & Lincoln 2003).

- The approach allows for the study of complex social phenomena or social situations as processes (Creswell 2009). What the participants perceive as problems or concerns, and how they resolve their concerns are active, dynamic processes.
• It enables the researcher to develop theory. The focus was not just on describing the participants’ experiences; it was also on developing theory to better explain the research situation under investigation (Creswell 2009; Goulding 2002). Glaser (1978) noted that grounded theory provides a systematic approach to developing theory that helps the researcher better explain complex social situations.

• Grounded theory provides for the generation of rich data. This rich data in turn enables the researcher and the reader to better comprehend the social situation under study (Denscombe 2007).

• It is a rigorous, structured approach that is well accepted by the scientific community. Meticulous use of the approach would ensure greater credibility (Denscombe 2007).

Data was gathered from interviews with 19 foreign managers and 19 local employees. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Participants were obtained from referrals from trade missions, chambers of commerce and business acquaintances. The interviews were complemented with focus groups. Data from the focus groups were used to check and corroborate the results from the individual interviews.

The participants came from seven Anglo-based companies from the service sectors such as accounting, banking, advertising and consulting. More than half the participants were female, reflecting the female dominated service industry. Data was analysed using the grounded theory, constant comparative approach which incorporated open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

The coding process generated a list of concepts and categories from which a model of how the participants experience the problems was developed. The analysis persisted until theoretical saturation was reached, or until no new information emerged.

1.8 Definition of key terms

The definitions of some of the key terms used in this research study are listed below.

Culture comprises the values, beliefs, and norms of a group of people (Hofstede 2001; Matsumoto 2001).

Communication is the process in which information is shared and understood (Kincaid 1979; McShane & von Glinow 2008).
Leadership is about motivating and enabling others to contribute towards the organisations’ goals and objectives (McShane & von Glinow 2008).

Language is the collection of codes and symbols used by a group of people to convey a message (Gudykunst 2004; McShane & von Glinow 2008).

Perception is the process of selecting, organising and interpreting information received (McShane & von Glinow 2008).

Power is the ability to persuade or influence others to achieve a goal or objective (Yukl 2013).

Roles are task, functions, duties and responsibilities that go along with a position or a station in life (Biddle 1986).

1.9 Thesis overview

Chapter One describes the background of this research study, including its stated aims and objectives. The rationale for this study and the definitions of key terms used are also outlined.

Chapter Two reviews the literature related to the research topic in the areas of culture, communication and leadership. The review also identifies the research gap and the conceptual framework underpinning this study.

Chapter Three provides an overview and rationale for the grounded theory approach used for this study. It also details the processes undertaken in the research study including the recruitment and selection of the participants, the conduct of the individual interviews and focus groups, and the analysis and interpretation of the data collected.

Chapter Four presents a brief profile of the participants, a sample coding process and the results of the data analysis. The results are presented according to the themes or categories emerging from the data. A model integrating the different categories is outlined at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Five presents a discussion on the themes arising from the data analysis. The themes raised are compared with those in the extant literature and explored for their implications for theory, practice and further research.
Chapter Six discusses the research questions and provides recommendations for theory, practice and further research.
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In grounded theory, there are differing views on the role of the literature. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that the researcher should always commence a study without any preconceived ideas or assumptions. Hence, a review of the literature should only be done after data collection. However, more contemporary authors such as Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Charmaz (2006) point out that an early review is essential to obtain theoretical sensitivity or general insights into a research situation. The only caveat is that the researcher should be wary of allowing the literature to influence data collection and analysis. Additionally, Ng and Hase (2008) note that the literature review should be done early as it sets the boundary for the research questions and the analysis of findings. This researcher has adopted this more contemporary point of view.

This literature review commences with a discussion on communication. This is followed by a review of culture and its impact on communication. Next, culture and its links to leadership are explored. A brief discussion of Vietnamese culture follows. This is subsequently followed by a discussion of the cultural convergence theory. Finally the theoretical or conceptual framework for this study is outlined. The structure of the chapter is illustrated in Figure 2.1.

2.2 Communication

Communication has been defined in many different ways. More than 30 years ago, Dance and Larson (1972) found more than 126 definitions for communication. The number has substantially increased since then. Some definitions of communication relevant to this study include: the transmission of information, ideas and emotions (Berelson & Steiner 1964); ‘the exchange of messages and the creation of meaning’ (Gudykunst 2004, p. 9); ‘the process in which two or more individual share information to reach mutual understanding’ (Kincaid 1979, p. 31); and ‘the process by which information is transmitted and understood between two or more people’ (McShane & von Glinow 2008, p. 314). Today, communication is viewed as more of a process than a transfer of messages. Harris, Moran and Moran (2004), note that communication is always dynamic, with neither a beginning nor an end.
2.1 Introduction

2.2 Communication

2.3 Culture

2.4 Culture and communication

2.5 Confucianism

2.6 Culture and leadership

2.7 Cultural convergence and divergence

2.8 Vietnamese culture and communication at work

2.9 Organisational culture

2.10 Conceptual framework

Source: Developed for this research study
A model depicting the communication process is presented in Figure 2.2. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2008) explain that there are a number of key components in the communication process including the sender who transmits the message, the receiver who accepts the message, the medium and the environment in which the message takes place, and the noise that stops the message from getting through.

**Figure 2.2 Communication process model**

![Communication process model](image)

Source: Adler and Rodman (2006, p. 12)

When communicating, the sender will attach meaning to the message by choosing the most appropriate words or symbols of communication (Gudykunst 2004). The message can be verbal (written or spoken) or non-verbal (body language). The sender will also use the medium of communication (including face-to-face, telephone or email) that they think will best convey the meaning of the message (McShane & von Glinow 2010). The receiver on the other end, upon receiving the message, will assign meaning to the message and provide feedback. The environment provides the background in which the communication process takes place. This refers not only to the physical location but also to the experiences and perspectives of the communicators (Adler & Rodman 2006).

According to Samovar et al. (2008) effective communication requires the sender and the receiver to attach similar meanings to the message being exchanged. That is, communication
is only effective when ‘the person interpreting the message attaches meaning to the message similar to what was intended by the person transmitting it’ (Gudykunst 2004, p.29).

Unfortunately, this often does not occur because of the many noises or barriers that prevent good communication. Gudykunst (2004) and McShane and von Glinow (2010) noted that there are two major barriers to communication, namely language and perception.

2.2.1 Language barriers

McShane and von Glinow (2010) contend that the communication process can only be effective when both sender and receiver have a common ‘codebook’ or have a common understanding of the words and symbols used in the message. If the communicators do not have a common codebook, they will appear to speak the same language but they will understand each other very differently. Adler and Rodman (2006) outline a number of impediments to common understanding inherent in language, namely, jargon, equivocal and relative words, and accent.

*Jargon*: Samovar et al. (2008) define jargon as technical words used in various occupational fields such as banking and finance that have specialised meanings. Jargon can improve communication efficiency when both communicators understand it (McShane & von Glinow 2010). However, using jargon when one or both of the communicators do not understand it, or are simply not aware of it will only result in confusion and misunderstanding.

*Equivocal and relative words*: These are words that can have multiple meanings (Adler & Rodman 2006). ‘Bat’, for instance, can refer to an animal, a baseball bat, an attempt to render support (to bat for) or to do something without hesitation (‘right off the bat’). Communicators not in the know would naturally find it difficult to understand the difference. Similarly, relative words such as big, large, expansive, massive, which all relate to size, can cause tremendous confusion for communicators who lack fluency in the language.

*Accent*: Samovar et al. (2008) contend that accents are simply variations in pronunciation that occur with people speaking the same language. Gudykunst (2004) points out that poor pronunciation and strange accents can present a considerable barrier to communication. For example, Indians and the Singaporeans both speak English but they invariably speak it with a different accent. Communicators unfamiliar with different accents will invariably feel lost and disoriented.
2.2.2 Perceptual barrier

Gudykunst (2004) and Adler and Rodman (2006) contend that perception similarly presents a barrier to communication. When communicating, communicators invariably go through what social scientists refer to as the perceptual process. Both senders and receivers will select the information that they think is important, and organise the same information in a way that makes the most sense to them. Nonetheless, Gudykunst (2004) and McShane and von Glinow (2008) observe that what information the communicators attend to, and how they organise them, are often prone to error. Accordingly, Adler and Rodman (2006) and McShane and von Glinow (2008) outline a number of errors in perception that communicators make during conversation: self-serving bias, first impressions and false consensus.

Self-serving bias, or the communicators’ inclination to assess themselves more favorably, is a common perceptual error. It occurs when the communicator credits successful outcomes to self, whilst blaming unsuccessful outcomes on others. This phenomenon has been confirmed in a number of research studies. In one study, Larson (1977) handed out 56 pairs of college students a problem-solving task and subsequently informed them of their performances. The results of the study indicated that the students were more willing to take responsibility for their successes than for their failures.

First impressions occur when the communicator labels others based on first information. This familiar occurrence, which McShane and von Glinow (2008) refer to as the primacy effect, has been confirmed in a number of studies. One study closely examined how 289 health professionals reacted to a set of photographs. Each participant was asked to rate the persons in the photographs on 15 personality traits. Overwhelmingly, the more attractive the persons in the photographs were, the more favourable were the personality ratings (Nordholm 1980).

False consensus refers to the communicators’ inclination to assume that others are like them. McShane and von Glinow (2008) note that communicators tend to believe that others will have the same attitudes, beliefs and desires as them, which may or may not be true. Several studies appear to confirm this finding. Ross, Greene and House (1977), for example, found in their study of 584 undergraduates that they tended to hold on to ‘false consensus’. That is, the student participants were inclined to believe that their replies to the questions asked in the study were ‘normal’ and that others would have similar replies.
2.2.3 Factors influencing perception

The perceptual process, and consequently, the inclination for perceptual error are in turn influenced by a number of factors including age and experience; social roles; cognitive abilities; and cultural values and beliefs (Adler & Rodman 2006).

*Age and experience:* How communicators perceive persons or events is invariably influenced by their age and experience. For example, the older and more experienced the communicators are, the less likely they are to be influenced by first impressions. Due to mistakes made in the past, they are less likely to be swayed by surface evidence. They are more likely to deliberate further before making decisions.

*Social roles:* The roles that communicators play also shape their perceptions. Wood (2010) observes that the communicators’ profession can influence their perceptions. For example, if the communicators’ profession requires detachment and objectivity, they are unlikely to view emotional outburst favourably. Positions of authority also appear to influence perceptions. In one study, Holtgraves (1994) conducted four experiments on 296 university students to examine how status can affect understanding of indirect requests. The results showed that when the students were of the same status, they took longer to understand indirect requests. However, there was no such issue when the speaker was of higher status.

*Cognitive abilities:* Wood (2010) is of the opinion that perception can also be affected by cognitive ability. Cognition refers to the ability to think in terms of theories and concepts. Some communicators will be more inclined to elaborate on how they think about people and situations, which in turn, affects how they perceive things. Invariably, education and training play a part. The more educated the communicator is, the more likely he or she is to engage in abstract theories and refrain from drawing simplistic conclusions.

*Cultural values and beliefs:* Finally, Adler and Rodman (2006), Wood (2010) and Gudykunst (2004) all agree that culture has a strong influence on perception. They note that communicators tend to bring their personal experiences and cultural perspectives to the communication process. This acts as a ‘filter’ with which they select, organise and interpret the information exchanged. When both communicators come from similar cultural backgrounds they are likely to perceive and interpret the messages exchanged in a similar manner.
They are also more likely to interpret messages in the way they are supposed to be interpreted (Gudykunst 2004). Unfortunately, the reverse is also true, when both receiver and sender come from different cultural backgrounds.

2.3 Culture

Like communication, culture has been defined in many different ways. Definitions vary mostly because of the emphasis on different aspects of culture, as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Definitions of culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kluckhohn (1951, p. 86)</td>
<td>… the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete ‘design for living’.</td>
<td>Way of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson (1979, p. 234)</td>
<td>… the way of life of a particular class, group or social category, the complex of ideologies that are actually adopted as moral preferences or principles of life.</td>
<td>Way of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson (1969, p. 9)</td>
<td>… whatever else a culture maybe, it is primarily a group problem-solving device instituted by a human community to cope with its basic practical problems.</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampden-Turner &amp; Trompenaars (1998 pp. 7, 9)</td>
<td>… the way in which a group of people solves problems. and … every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems.</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hofstede (1980, p. 25)</td>
<td>… the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one human group from another.</td>
<td>Cognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall (1959, p. 191)</td>
<td>Culture is communication and communication is culture.</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 10)</td>
<td>… a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community.</td>
<td>Values, beliefs, norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsumoto (2001, p. 10)</td>
<td>… the set of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviours.</td>
<td>Values, beliefs, norms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study
The most widely accepted definitions of culture, however, appear to be those that focus on values, beliefs, and norms, similar to those of Ting-Toomey and Matsumo in Table 2.1. While emphasizing cognition, Hofstede (1980) also points out that every cultural group has their very own set of values and beliefs which informs group members about what is right or wrong, true or false and good or bad. Samovar et al. (2008) contend that these values and beliefs provide members with a set of rules for living. These rules, in turn, guide members on how to behave and how to understand other people’s behaviours (Keesing 1974), and adherence to these rules is often required for members to work effectively in their groups (Samovar et al. 2008).

Just as importantly, Keesing (1974) and Samovar et al. (2008) assert that group members are often oblivious to the rules they follow. Members unconsciously follow the set of rules or norms, because they have been learning them from a very young age. Such rules have been slowly but surely instilled in them very early in life by their parents, teachers and peers (Hofstede 2001). Samovar et al. (2008) point out that this instinctive adherence to societal rules does not usually pose a problem until the member interacts with members from another group or another culture who follow another set of rules.

With respect to communication, Gudykunst (2004) notes that different cultures hold onto different values and beliefs about communication, including what communication is and why people communicate. These values and beliefs, in turn, provide them with a distinctive set of communication rules or norms to follow when interacting with others. The same goes for leadership and management. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) point out that different cultures hold different values and beliefs on good leadership. These values and beliefs in turn provide leaders with direction and guidance on what they should do or how they should behave.

As highlighted by Samovar et al. (2008) the differences in rules observed can present a challenge when members of different cultures meet and interact. In particular, the application of different rules of behaviour can result in inadvertent misunderstandings. For example, one culture may interpret criticisms and reproaches from employees as engagement and involvement. Another culture may interpret the same criticism as insolence and defiance. Similarly, one culture may perceive the managers’ involvement in employees’ personal life as an intrusion or invasion of privacy. Another culture may view the same involvement as a show of concern or interest.
Thus, understanding the values and beliefs underlying behaviours is most important in avoiding misunderstanding. This begs the next question, what are some of these values and beliefs? And how do cultures differ in their values and beliefs? This will be addressed in the next section.

Before examining how cultures differ in terms of values, some reference should also be made to what Stewart and Bennett (1991) describe as objective and subjective culture. Objective culture generally refers to the visible aspects of culture including the economic, political, religious, educational, and familial institutions that govern society. Subjective culture refers to the hidden aspects of culture including values, beliefs and norms that define a society. Nonetheless, Hofstede (2001) explained that objective culture is intricately linked to subjective culture. Values and beliefs, for example, are often influenced by physical and social factors such as geography and demography. These values are then expressed as social norms or customs that are developed, maintained and reinforced through institutions such as the family, religion, schools and governments. In this study, however, the focus is primarily on subjective culture, values, beliefs and norms of a group of people.

2.3.1 National culture

As mentioned earlier, culture generally refers to the set of values, beliefs and norms that a group of people share. The group of people can be a community, an organisation, or in the case of national culture, a group of nationals. National culture can vary considerably. These variations have been investigated closely by a number of researchers, who have provided a number of models to explain how national cultures vary from one another. Each of these models contains a set of dimensions which are used to compare cultures with each other. Some of the more frequently used models include: Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) value orientations; Hall’s (1976) communication style; and Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions. These models are helpful for this study because they help to identify difference in values, beliefs and norms between cultures.

2.3.2 Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s value orientation

Anthropologists Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) from Harvard University were two of the first researchers who attempted to explain how cultures vary. Their cultural variability model was based on value orientations, and provided the foundation from which later models were developed, such as Hall’s and Hofstede’s models.
According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), variations in culture are: group orientation (individual or collective); orientation to nature or environment (mastery or harmony); orientation to activities (doing or being); orientation to time (present or past); and orientation to people (good or evil) (See Table 2.2.) These authors argue that Western cultures tend to perceive human nature as good; are inclined to mastering the environment around them; are biased towards getting things done to master the environment; view time as a scarce resource and are therefore focused on its maximum utilisation; and are likely to embrace individualism. On the other hand, they point out that Eastern cultures tend to perceive human nature as both good and evil; firmly believe that they should live in harmony with others around them and are therefore focused on appropriate behaviours and good relationships; and are likely to emphasise group interest and hierarchy.

Table 2.2    Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's value orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value Orientation</th>
<th>Mastery: Control nature</th>
<th>Harmony: Live in harmony with nature</th>
<th>Submission: Submit to nature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to nature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to people</td>
<td>Individualist: Social structure based on individuals</td>
<td>Collateral: Social structure based on groups and equality</td>
<td>Lineal: Social structure based on groups and hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to activities</td>
<td>Being: Focus on the moment</td>
<td>Becoming: Focus on reaching potential</td>
<td>Doing: Focus on goal accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to time</td>
<td>Past: Decisions are based on history and tradition</td>
<td>Present: Decisions are based on the present</td>
<td>Future: Decision are based on future prospects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to human nature</td>
<td>Good: Assumes human nature is good</td>
<td>Mixed: Assumes human is both good and evil</td>
<td>Evil: Assumes human is evil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)

2.3.3 Hall's communication style

Hall (1976), an American anthropologist and a well-respected cross-cultural researcher, differentiated cultures according to their communication orientation. According to Hall, cultures vary in terms of communication styles, in that they have high or low context communication. High context communication occurs when ‘most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message’ (Hall 1976, p. 79).
In contrast, low context communication occurs when most of the information is contained in the verbal message or where ‘the mass of information is vested in the explicit code’ (Hall 1976, p. 70). Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996, p. 32) subsequently expanded on high-context communication as being ‘indirect, ambiguous and understated with the speaker being reserved and sensitive to the listener’, whilst low context communication is seen as being ‘direct, explicit, open and precise, and consistent with one’s feelings’.

Gudykunst (2004) observed that members of individualist cultures tend to favour low context communication whilst members of collectivist cultures tend to favour high context communication. Generally, high context and low context cultures differ in their preferences for direct/indirect communication. In collectivist cultures, speakers are encouraged to be discreet and talk around the topic. In fact they consider it rude and inappropriate to be frank and direct. In individualist cultures, speakers are required to be clear and to the point. They consider indirectness not only confusing but also highly suspicious. This difference in orientation can often lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding in the workplace (Gudykunst & Matsumoto 1996).

Hall and Hall (1990) note that high and low context cultures also differ in their need for background information. Low context cultures such as the Americans tend to ask for detailed information whenever they are ‘asked to do something or make a decision’ (Hall & Hall 1990, p. 67). In contrast, high context cultures such as the Japanese, who have close relationships with important others, often ‘do not expect much in-depth information’ (p. 66). The difference in orientation results in members of high context cultures feeling annoyed and patronised when they are given lots of information that they do not need and members of low context cultures feeling lost and confused when they are given too little information.

2.3.4 Hofstede’s cultural dimensions

The most widely used cultural variability model, as shown in Table 2.3, is the one developed by Hofstede (1980, 2001). From 1967 to 1973, Hofstede collected and analysed data from 117,000 IBM employees working in 40 countries (Hofstede 1980). Based on this study, Hofstede identifies four value dimensions that differentiate cultures: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. In 1987 the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) argued that Hofstede’s cultural dimensions did not adequately reflect Asian values.
Subsequently, a fifth dimension, Confucian Dynamism, also known as short-term versus long-term orientation, was added. Little has been written on the last dimension and its effects on communication, however, and will therefore not be covered in this discussion of Hofstede’s value dimensions.

*Power distance* refers to the extent in which members of a culture accept unequal distribution of power (Hofstede 1980, 2001). Generally cultures vary in their tolerance for inequality and hierarchy, with high power distance cultures being more accepting. Hofstede (1980) points out that in high power distance culture, teachers expect obedience whilst students expect instructions. Similarly, employees value supervision and direction whilst supervisors appreciate deference and compliance.

**Table 2.3  Hofstede’s cultural dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hofstede's Cultural dimension</th>
<th>Power distance, the extent to which unequal power is accepted</th>
<th>Uncertainty avoidance, the extent to which uncertainty and ambiguity is tolerated</th>
<th>Individualism, the extent to which individual interest are emphasised</th>
<th>Masculinity/femininity, the extent to which achievement is emphasised over relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: Supports equal power</td>
<td>Low: Relishes uncertainty and ambiguity.</td>
<td>Collectivism: Values group interest over individual interest</td>
<td>Masculinity: Emphasises material wealth, competition and achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High: Observes differential power</td>
<td>High: Abhors uncertainty and ambiguity.</td>
<td>Individualism: Values individual interest over group interest</td>
<td>Femininity: Emphasises good relations, nurturance, and quality of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hofstede 2001

*Uncertainty avoidance* refers to the level of ambiguity or uncertainty which members of a culture feel comfortable with (Hofstede 1980, 2001). In essence, cultures differ in the way they deal with uncertainties and risk taking. High uncertainty avoidance cultures view uncertainties as threats to avoid, or consider that ‘what is different is dangerous’ (Hofstede...
Low uncertainty avoidance cultures on the other hand view uncertainties as challenges to be explored, or take the view that ‘what is different is curious’ (p. 119).

_Masculinity_ refers to the degree to which ‘masculine’ values are emphasised over ‘feminine’ values (Hofstede 1980, 2001). This value dimension corresponds to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) value orientation towards activity. Basically, masculine cultures are ‘doing’ cultures as they value competition, work achievement and advancement whilst femininity cultures are ‘being’ cultures as they value quality of life, relationships and harmony (Hofstede 1980, 2001).

_Individualism_ refers to the extent to which members of a culture value the individual over the collective group (Hofstede 1980, 2001). This value dimension corresponds to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) value orientation towards human nature. According to Triandis (1995) there are five features separating individualist from collectivist cultures:

1. **Group interest versus individual interest:** In individualist cultures personal goals override group goals (Triandis 1995). In collectivist cultures, however, group interests precede personal interests. Members of collectivist cultures often belong to groups (family members, schoolmates and colleagues) who take care of them in return for their loyalty (Hofstede 2001). The importance of these groups, however, can often vary (Triandis & Trafimow 2001). In collectivist China, for example, the family is considered the most important group. Conversely, in Japan, the most important group is the company or organisation.

2. **Independent versus interdependent selves:** Members of individualist cultures tend to view the self as distinct and independent from others (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Therefore their goal in life is to achieve (a) self-sufficiency or self-reliance, and (b) self-expression or self-actualisation. Members of collectivist cultures on the other hand see themselves closely connected to the group. Their goal is to promote group interest and group harmony by fitting in and engaging in right and proper behaviours (Fiske et al. 1998).

3. **Group norms versus individual attitudes:** In individualist cultures, member behaviours are primarily determined by attitudes, beliefs, needs and wants. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, member behaviours are mainly determined by social norms, including duties and responsibilities (Bontempo & Rivero 1992; Gudykunst & Mody
According to Dao (1986), the behaviours of independent members are more consistent with attitudes and beliefs, as they believe it is important to do what they think is right or feel is important. Any contradiction between feelings and behaviour is seen as hypocritical. For interdependent members, behaviours are less consistent with attitudes, as they are less concerned with doing what they think is right than with doing what others think is right, in order to maintain harmony and good relationships.

4. **Group relatedness versus rationality:** On one hand, members of individualist cultures are more transactional. On the other hand, members of collectivist cultures are more relational (Hofstede 1984). Due to their views on interdependence, members of collectivist cultures tend to emphasise relationships over monetary interest. They will maintain relationships with group members even when the cost clearly exceeds the benefits (Gannon & Newman 2001).

5. **Horizontal versus vertical relations:** According to Triandis and Gelfand (1998), collectivist and individualist cultures can also emphasise either horizontal or vertical social relations. Vertical and horizontal relations relate closely to Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) high and low power distance cultures respectively. For example, members of horizontal collectivist cultures such as Japan tend to view each other as equals, whereas members of vertical collectivist cultures such as India observe hierarchies. Accordingly, members of horizontal collectivist cultures are inclined to work in groups but they are also inclined to resist authority. In contrast, members of vertical collectivist cultures are more willing to submit to higher authority in the group. Gannon and Newman (2001). Of particular interest to this study is Gannon and Newman’s observation that countries with authoritarian rule such as China and Vietnam are related to vertical rather than horizontal collectivism.

### 2.4 Culture and communication

As discussed previously, culture and communication are intricately linked. That is, different cultures tend to have different values and beliefs which determine for them what communication behaviours are right and proper. Many researchers also point to the individualism-collectivism dimension as the major dimension differentiating cultures (Gudykunst 2004; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck 1961; Triandis 1995). Consequently, numerous studies have been conducted on how individualist and collectivist cultures differ in terms of communication. A brief summary is provided in Figure 2.4.
2.4.1 Direct vs indirect communication

Early studies conducted by researchers like Hall (1976) and Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) indicate that collectivist cultures tend to be more indirect than individualist cultures. That is, in communication, members of individualist cultures tend to use explicit verbal messages and direct expressions of feelings and opinions. In contrast, members of collectivist cultures are more likely to use implicit indirect messages such as body language and non-verbal cues. More recent studies seem to confirm these earlier findings (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 Individualist vs collectivist communication behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct/indirect communication (Hall 1976), Gudykunst &amp; Ting-Toomey (1988), Holtgraves (1997), Sanchez-Burks et. al. (2003)</th>
<th>Individualist cultures</th>
<th>Collectivist cultures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct – explicit and verbal, focus on facts and goals</td>
<td>Indirect – implicit and non-verbal, focus on meaning, uses body language and other non-verbal cues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive Fukuyama &amp; Greenfield (1983), Singhal &amp; Nagao (1993)</td>
<td>High – likely to express disagreements, show aggression, challenge and confront to advance own interest</td>
<td>Low – more restrained (Lustig &amp; Koestner 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts styles Trubisky et al. (1991), Ohbuchi et al. (1999), Onishi &amp; Bliss (2006).</td>
<td>In conflict situation they are more likely to compete and assert themselves to achieve their objectives</td>
<td>In conflict situation they are likely to accommodate and oblige others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancements vs self-effacement Kitayama et al. (1997), Heine et al. (2000)</td>
<td>Inclined to portray the self to others more positively</td>
<td>Inclined to be critical of self in public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-disclosure Ting-Toomey (1991), Chen (1995)</td>
<td>High self-disclosure – open, frank and more willing to share information about self</td>
<td>Low self-disclosure – reserved, not inclined to reveal information about self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this study
For example, Holtgraves (1997) investigated the communication styles of Korean and American undergraduates. The results reveal that the Korean students were more likely to speak indirectly than their American counterparts. Additionally, the study found the Korean students to be much better at understanding indirect meanings. Sanchez-Burks et al. (2003) likewise conducted experiments to examine variations in indirectness between Americans and East Asian employees. As expected, the results showed that the Americans were more direct than their East Asian colleagues. However the results also indicated that Americans can be just as indirect in informal situations, but at work they tended to be more forward and direct.

### 2.4.2 Communication assertiveness

Previous studies also suggest that Asians, who are predominantly collectivist, tend to be less assertive than Westerners, who are predominantly individualist. Assertiveness generally ‘involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways which respect the rights of other people’ (Lange et al. 1976, p. 38). For example, in a study of 150 Asian American and 135 Caucasian American college students, Fukuyama and Greenfeld (1983) found the Asian students to be considerably less assertive than their Caucasian counterparts. They observed that the Asian American students hesitated to express negative feelings or disagree with someone older.

One reason for the difference may be that individualist cultures generally view assertiveness positively. The results of Singhal and Nagao’s (1993) study on 118 American and 109 Japanese college students clearly illustrate this. They found the American students were more likely to link assertiveness with communication ability, while the Japanese students found assertive behaviours such as questioning or challenging the professors as improper even if they did not agree with them.

### 2.4.3 Communication accommodation

Prior studies similarly indicate that collectivist cultures tend to be more obliging and accommodating in conflict situations (Kim 2002). Trubisky et al. (1991) undertook a study of 212 Anglo-American and 231 Taiwanese undergraduates. The findings showed that the Taiwanese students used an obliging and avoiding style more than the American students. In another study, 126 male and 138 female American college students and 113 male and 94 female Japanese college students were asked to rate their conflict experiences.
The American students indicated that they preferred an assertive style of managing conflict, whereas the Japanese students revealed that they preferred avoidance styles (Ohbuchi et al. 1999).

2.4.4 Self-effacement vs self-enhancement

Early communication studies also suggest that individualist cultures tend to engage in self-enhancement or self-promotion whilst collectivist cultures tend to engage in self-effacement or self-criticism (Kitayama et al. 1997). More recent studies corroborate this finding. For example, Miller et al. (1992) asked 192 undergraduates in the United States to assess people who disclosed in a boastful, positive or negative fashion. They found the boasters and positive disclosers were not only better liked, but they were also viewed as more competent than the negative disclosers.

Heine, Takata and Lehman (2000) compared responses to a sample test conducted on Canadian and Japanese undergraduates and found that the Canadians were more reluctant to admit to poor performance. On the other hand the Japanese were more reluctant to acknowledge good performance. Kim (2002) provides a rather intriguing explanation for the phenomenon. She contends that whilst members of collectivist cultures use self-criticism to galvanise themselves to do better, members of individualist cultures use self-enhancement to boost their self-esteem and better themselves.

2.4.5 Communication apprehension

Previous research also indicates that members of collectivist cultures are more inclined to display communication apprehension than members of individualist cultures (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988). That is, members of collectivist cultures are more likely to be fearful and anxious over communication than members of individualist cultures. More recent studies indicate that little has changed. For example, Yook and Ahn (1999) studied 513 American and 555 Korean undergraduate students and found that the Koreans reported higher incidences of communication apprehension. Similarly Hsu (2004), in her study on 298 Taiwanese and 320 American undergraduate students, found the Taiwanese scored significantly higher in communication apprehension than the Americans.

One reason for the difference may be the negative perceptions that individualist cultures have of communication apprehension. Various studies conducted in American colleges noted that students with high communication apprehension were perceived as lacking self-esteem and
self-control (McCroskey et al. 1977), and as less competent and less attractive (McCroskey et al. 1975). The other reason for the difference may be the collectivist cultures’ general wariness with communication, specifically verbal communication. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2009) and Lustig and Koestner (2010) observed that whilst members of individualist cultures may value the spoken word, members of collectivist cultures may be more suspicious and distrustful of it. The idea is ‘one who speaks does not know’ and ‘to be always talking is against nature’ (Samovar et al. 2009, p. 236).

In sum, there are clear differences between how collectivist cultures and individualist cultures communicate. These differences can be attributed mainly to the differences in values and beliefs, described earlier. For example, individualist cultures tend to prioritise individual over group goals and interests and therefore tend to be more concerned with being direct, assertive and competitive to get what they want. On the other hand, collectivist cultures tend to put group goals and interests first, and are therefore more concerned with being indirect, restrained, and accommodating in order to maintain good relations and harmony.

2.5 Confucianism

A review of Confucianism is in order because of its strong influence on interpersonal relationships and communication in East Asia. Traditional thinking in Vietnam, as in other East Asian countries, is strongly influenced by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (Zhu 2003). Confucianism came with the Chinese to Vietnam at around 111 BC. Together with their farming and building technologies, the Chinese brought their language, their judicial system, their education and their philosophy of life to Vietnam.

The goal of Confucianism is social order and ensuring that people live in peace and harmony with each other. This goal comes in part from Confucius’s background. Confucius lived in times of continual and bloody conflicts known to Chinese historians as the Warring States Period (Hoobler & Hoobler 2009). To attain the lofty goal of peace and order, Confucius urged members to pursue the five principles of ren, yi, zhi, xin and li which translate to benevolence, honesty, knowledge, integrity and propriety (Yum 1988). Confucius declared that the most important of these principles is ren, which admonishes adherents to demonstrate kindness to others. Further, to achieve ren, yi, zhi, and xin, Confucius emphasised li, which refers to proper social behaviours or norms (Zhu 2003).
To further maintain social order, Confucius urged members to adhere to the five relationship principles, namely ‘rulers show justice and subjects show loyalty, fathers show love and sons show filial piety, husbands show initiation and wives show obedience, older brothers show love and younger brothers show reverence, and friends show mutual faith’ (Chen & Chung 1994, p. 95). Confucius believed that there would be greater social order when members recognised and understood their positions in life and undertook to fulfill their responsibilities accordingly. Confucius was of the opinion that if you ‘let the ruler be a ruler and the subject a subject’ and ‘let the father be a father and the son a son’ then there would be order, first in the family then in the larger society (Hoobler & Hoobler 2009, p. 23).

2.5.1 Confucianism and interpersonal relationships

Yum (1988) and Chen and Chung (1994) point out that adherence to Confucian principles will in turn determine how members relate to one another. First, relationships in Confucian societies tend to be mutually obligatory. Chen and Chung (1994) observe that in traditional Confucian cultures parents are obliged to provide for their children and children are obliged to remain filial to their parents. Likewise, employers are obliged to look out for their employees and employees are obliged to defer to their employers. Lustig and Koestner (2010) similarly point out that Confucianism is on the main more about social relations and social responsibility or obligations than about the self.

Next, relationships in a Confucian culture are also more exclusive. Yum (1988) and Chen and Chung (1994) note that members of Confucian cultures tend to make clear distinctions between in-group and out-group members, which has implications for work and business relationships. Triandis and Trafimow (2001, p. 372), for example, point out that in collectivist cultures, when members meet with other in-group members, they are likely to ‘help, support, cooperate and even self-sacrifice.’ In contrast, when members meet with out-group members they can be suspicious and competitive.

In Confucian cultures, relationships also tend to be more particularistic. That is, members apply different rules of behaviour to different people and to different situations (Yum 1988). These rules, however, depend on the relationships, the status of the other person and the specific context. For example, family members who are older or of higher status are accorded greater respect and deference. Likewise, family and friends receive better treatment than strangers.
Finally, relationships tend to be more hierarchical in Confucian cultures. Chen and Chung (1994) note that the Confucian emphasis on obligatory and particularistic relationships amplifies the impact of age, sex, roles or status differential to create hierarchies. Strict obligations placed on children to respect parents and subordinates, and to defer to superiors, for example, serve to ensure that hierarchy remains firmly in place.

2.5.2 Confucianism and communication patterns

Yum (1988) and Chen and Chung (1994) also note that adherence to Confucian principles affects how members communicate. Yum (1988) observed that communication in Confucian cultures is more about building and maintaining good relations than about sending a message. To maintain good relations, communication between members is invariably polite.

Politeness comes from the Confucian notion of decorum and proper behaviour (Fang & Faure 2011). It refers to the idea of being courteous, considerate, modest, and most importantly, respectful (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998). Generally, one can show politeness and respect by using appropriate honorific language forms (Yum 1988). Older and more senior persons, for example, should always be addressed using formal honorific terms. Politeness and respect can also be displayed by not talking back, or not disagreeing but listening to the older more authoritative person with downcast eyes (Hwa-Froelich & Westby 2003).

Politeness and respect may also require one to pay more attention to being indirect and implicit (Yum 1988). Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) explain that to be implicit and indirect means not spelling everything out and always leaving something for the listener to think about. Fang and Faure (2011) note that Chinese Confucian communication is primarily face directed. The Confucian emphasis on considering others, proper relationships and harmony requires one to be indirect and implicit. The idea is one should be indirect so as not to offend others and cause a loss of face (Yum 1988).

To ensure good relations, communication in Confucian cultures is also more oriented to listening. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) note that in Confucian cultures, listening is prioritised over speaking. First and foremost, not everyone is entitled to speak. Speaking is generally the preserve of older, more experienced authoritative figures. Fang and Faure (2011) point out that children are only perceived as good and obedient when they listen quietly and do not interrupt conversations.
In addition, there is a general distrust and suspicion of talk (Lustig & Koester 2010). The idea is that the more one talks the more mistakes one makes. There is also the belief that the person who talks does not know, and the person who does not talk, knows. In the main, with Confucian cultures, silence is valued more than talk.

Yum (1998) contends that with the Confucian focus on listening, the responsibility is thus placed on the listener to grasp the meaning of the message sent. This runs contrary to the Western belief that it is the speaker’s responsibility to make the meaning of the message clear. The difference in focus and responsibility between the Confucian and Western cultures in turn creates multiple opportunities for miscommunication and misunderstanding. In summary, the major theme coming from the literature on culture and communication is that different cultures have different ideas on what makes for good communication, and what constitutes right and proper communication behaviour.

2.6 Leadership

Like culture and communication, the definition of leadership generates continuous debate. Nevertheless, in 2001, several leadership experts did come together to agree that leadership is generally about motivating and enabling the employees so they can better work towards the organisation’s success (McShane & von Glinow 2010). There are also many theories on and around leadership. Most of the theories, however, were developed from the West, leading to issues of applicability (Miller et al. 2012). The main theories are articulated as follows.

2.6.1 The trait theory of leadership

One of the earliest theories on leadership is trait theory. The theory began with the Great Man theory of leadership in the 18th century. The Great Man theory proposes that great leaders have a unique set of traits or attributes that differentiate them from others. Numerous studies have been made since to find out exactly what those traits are. The results, however, have been rather mixed. For example, Stogdill (1948) finds effective leaders to be sociable, dependable, persistent, confident, cooperative and adaptable. Mann (1959) in turn finds effective leaders to be well adjusted, extroverted, domineering, masculine and conservative. More recently Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) identify effective leaders to be ambitious and willing to lead, honest and reliable, confident and self-assured, knowledgeable and reasonable.
In general, the various studies of leadership traits have failed to unearth a common set of traits or characteristics that can be attributed to good leaders. This has led academics and researchers into questions concerning leadership to move on to behavioural theories of leadership. Behavioural theories in the main focus on how leaders behave. The idea is that good leaders will behave in a certain manner.

2.6.2 Behavioural theory of leadership

The focus on behavioural theories of leadership began with a study in 1939 by a group of researchers led by the psychologist, Kurt Lewin (Lewin et al. 1939), on leadership styles. This early study, involving groups of juvenile boys in a youth centre, utilised two leadership styles, namely the autocratic and democratic leadership styles. The autocratic leader basically told the boys what to do and closely supervised them. The leader made all the decisions with little input from the boys. The democratic leader, on the other hand, only guided the boys. The democratic leader worked with the boys to determine how best to do the job. He or she also encouraged their input during decision-making (Lussier & Achua 2009). The results of the study were revealing. Notably, the autocratic leadership style encouraged the boys to depend more on the leader. They were also less likely to work with each other. In contrast, the democratic leadership style not only encouraged the boys to show more initiative and responsibility, they were also friendlier and more likely to work with each other.

Following Lewin’s initiative, Rensis Likert conducted a more detailed study at the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center to ascertain leadership effectiveness (Lussier & Achua 2009; Yukl 2013). Likert compared the behaviours of high and low performing leaders in a company and identified two leadership styles, namely the job-centred and employee-centred leadership styles. Generally, the job-centred leader focuses on getting the job done. The leader also articulates clearly to the employees their roles and objectives. The employee-centred leader on the other hand focuses on developing good relations and on meeting employees’ needs. This includes looking out for the employees and facilitating trust and support through regular communication.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the results from the various leadership studies have all proved inconclusive. Whilst a number of the studies have indicated greater employee satisfaction with the employee-centred leader, no consistent results emerged that point to one best way to lead (Bass & Bass 2009). Disappointment in this endeavour led to the development of the contingency theory of leadership.
2.6.3 Contingency / situational theory of leadership

Contingency theory postulates that the best leadership style is contingent upon the situation (Lussier & Achua 2009; Yukl 2013). That is, for a leader to be effective, the leader’s style or behaviours must match the employee and the context or situation. Fiedler and Chemers (1967) developed the first situational leadership theory. They observed that leaders tended to focus on tasks or on relationships, which closely approximates Likert's job-centred and employee-centred leadership styles respectively. More importantly, these authors assert that leadership effectiveness depends very much on the situation. The task-oriented leader is concerned with production (Blake & Mouton 1964) and is motivated by achievement (McClelland 1961). Generally, the task-oriented leader is focused on completing the task at hand and does so by carefully articulating for their employees their roles and expectations. In contrast, the relationship-oriented leader is more concerned with people (Blake & Mouton 1964) and is motivated by close affiliations (McClelland 1961). In essence, the relationship-oriented leader emphasises close relations with employees, and does so by maintaining communication, support and mutual trust.

Various studies in the United States indicate that employee performance increases with the task-oriented leader (Bass & Bass 2009). On the one hand, that makes sense: employees will invariably work harder and faster when their managers’ place pressure on them to work on quality and productivity. On the other hand, there also appear to be close links between the relationship-oriented leader and employee satisfaction. A number of studies point to improved employee satisfaction with the relationship-oriented leader (Bass & Bass 2009; Yukl 2013). Due to the benefits that each leadership style affords, there have been strong calls from various quarters to integrate the two styles in the workplace. The idea is that the leader is most effective when he or she is both relationship-oriented and task-oriented. That is, the leader should not only focus on the task at hand but should also consider the people performing the task. Treating employees like machines will invariably decrease morale and performance.

Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) developed another situational leadership theory. They identified seven leadership styles with directive leadership at one end of the continuum and participative leadership at the other end. Like Fiedler and Chemers (1967), they assert that leadership effectiveness depends on the manager, the subordinates and the situation. Directive leadership, like task-oriented leadership, is focused on the task at hand. The directive leader instructs the employees on what to do and how to do it in order to accomplish the tasks at
hand (Lussier & Achua 2009; Yukl 2013). Consistent with the situational theory of leadership however, directive leadership may not be appropriate in all situations. Lussier and Achua (2009) indicate that directive leadership is appropriate when employees have lower skills and are tolerant of autocratic leadership. It is also appropriate when the task is complex or ambiguous, where the employees may need more guidance.

In direct contrast, participative leadership is focused on obtaining employee input. The participative leader queries the employees on their opinions, listens to their suggestions and takes them into account before making decisions (Lussier & Achua 2009; Yukl 2013). Bass and Bass (2009) also note that participative leadership is not only about employee contribution but also about employee equality. That is, every employee has an equal part to play in contributing towards the success of the organisation. Lussier and Achua (2009), however, indicate that participative leadership works best when the employee is highly skilled and wants to contribute. Additionally, this leadership style is more applicable when the task is structured and well defined.

In 1971, based on the leadership styles previously developed, House (1971, 1996) advanced the path goal theory of leadership. According to House, there are four leadership styles that the managers can choose from, namely the supportive, directive, participative and achievement oriented leadership styles. The directive leadership style is closely associated with the task-oriented leader and is focused on spelling out work expectations, job scheduling and clear instructions (Dorfman et al. 1997; House 1996). In contrast, the supportive leadership style is closely associated with the people-oriented leader and is more focused on employee needs which includes showing concern for them and providing for their wellbeing (Dorfman et al. 1997; House 1996).

Like Fiedler and Chemers (1967) and Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973), House (1971) points out that leadership effectiveness depends on the subordinates, and on the task at hand. Nonetheless, whilst Fiedler and Chemers stress the importance of changing the situation by such means as modifying the structure of the task to match the leadership style used, House emphasises the importance of changing the leadership style to best match the situation. That is, the leadership style used should depend on the situation, taking into account the subordinates and the environment, to maximise employee performance and job satisfaction (Lussier & Achua 2009; Yukl 2013). This, however, puts pressure on the leader to be more adaptable.
2.6.4 Leadership roles

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in leadership roles (Miller et al. 2012). Roles have been described by different authors as duties, responsibilities, functions, tasks or simply behavioural expectations (Biddle 1986). The idea behind leadership roles is that leaders occupy elevated positions in the organisation, and as such there will be expectations by members about what jobs or tasks they do, and how they do them to ensure effectiveness.

One of the best-known studies on leadership roles was done by Mintzberg in 1973. Mintzberg observed five American chief executives over a one-week period and identified ten managerial roles in three generic categories. He observes that the managers’ jobs are often interpersonal in nature and include being a figurehead, a leader and a liaison person. He notes that the managers’ tasks are also informational, and they invariably involve monitoring what is going at work and providing employees with pertinent information. Finally, Mintzberg holds the view that the managers’ duties are decisional in nature in that they often have to resolve problems, allocate scarce resources and conduct negotiations.

More recently, Kraut, Pedigo, McKenna and Dunnette (2005) undertook a comprehensive study on roles, this time on 1412 managers in a large business enterprise in the United States. In the main, they find that management roles differ considerably across the organisational hierarchy. On the one hand, lower-level managers are more focused on ‘instructing subordinates,’ which includes coaching and training; and managing the employees’ performance which includes checking in on them and providing them feedback. Middle-level managers, on the other hand, are more focused on ‘planning and allocating resources,’ which involves, among other things, coming up with goals and strategies and communicating them to the employees. In contrast to both of these, higher-level managers are focused on the general environment which requires executives to be more aware of business, economic and social trends that may affect the organisation.

Following Kraut et al.’s (2005) study, Yukl (2013) proposes that there are two major roles that the managers assume, namely the leading and managing roles. In the leading role, the focus is on interpersonal matters and on motivating employees to achieve the goals set. Alternatively, the managing role is more focused on planning, organising and controlling the organisation’s resources to ensure that the various objectives are met. Irrespective of their position in the organisation, however, managers must be able to manage the two roles effectively, with the leading role increasing in importance for higher level managers.
2.6.5  Asian leadership – paternalism

Leadership has been researched and discussed extensively in Western cultures. In contrast, there is relatively little that has been written about leadership in Confucian East Asia. The scant literature, however, does point to paternalism as the dominant leadership style (Aycan 2004; Pellegrini & Scandura 2008). Paternalism is deeply rooted in the Confucian family tradition (Samovar et al. 2009). It is characterised by close relations and hierarchies. Like the father, the superior in a company is obliged to provide and nurture the subordinate, and like the dutiful son, the subordinate is obliged to defer to and obey the superior (Aycan 2006).

Farh and Cheng (2000, p. 91) define paternalistic leadership as ‘a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence’. In other words, paternalism is a combination of the authoritarian and benevolent leadership styles. On the one hand, the authoritarian leader is a leader who asserts control and demands loyalty from his or her subordinates. The benevolent leader, on the other hand, is more concerned with and interested in the welfare of his or her employees. Sinha (1990) notes that the combination of benevolence and authoritarianism reflects the dual role of the paternal leader, namely caring and nurturing on the one hand and authoritative and disciplinarian on the other.

Aycan (2004) points out that the roles and duties of the paternal leader can be extensive. Generally leaders are expected to be in the know and are obliged to provide both professional and personal guidance to their employees. They are also expected to support their employees and their immediate families. This may even extend to giving them financial assistance in times of need. Pellegrini and Scandura (2008) assert that for peace and harmony to prevail at work, both managers and employees must play their respective roles. When one party complies with their role expectations but the other neglects theirs, disaffection or worse, conflict, will invariably occur.

A number of studies point out that paternalism can be a very effective leadership style, particularly in collectivist East Asian cultures (Farh & Cheng 2000; Pellegrini & Scandura 2008). Apparently, in these cultures, employees exert themselves because of close, dependent relationships. For example, employees would labour for their managers because they trust that their employers would act in their best interests. Managers, in turn, would try their best to provide for their employees because they trust their employees to respond with loyalty and commitment.
Nevertheless, paternalism has been received rather negatively in Western countries. One reason for this is the perception that paternalistic leadership is authoritarian (Pellegrini & Scandura 2008), and it facilitates a power differential between managers and employees. Several authors however opine that this perception may be a little misplaced (Chen & Lee 2008). The idea is that the managers may wield more power and authority, but with greater power comes greater responsibility. Confucian doctrine dictates that this power should only be used for common good, not for self-interest (Samovar et al. 2009).

Pellegrini and Scandura (2008) further observe that with increasing competition from global markets and the constant pressure to adapt, the role of close dependent relationships and paternalism has diminished. Long-term mutually obligatory relationships between management and employees have slowly been replaced with relationships that are much shorter and more transactional. This is unfortunate really, as Tsui et al. (1997) point out, because the paternalistic approach to leadership can sometimes produce the most productive, loyal, and committed employees.

2.6.6 Culture and leadership

As pointed out earlier, most studies on leadership have been done in Western countries such as the United States. Accordingly the theories and concepts developed such as autocratic versus democratic leadership, task-oriented versus people-oriented leadership mostly reflect Western ideas and cultures. Research on leadership in other cultures however has been relatively scant. One notable study that has tried to address this is the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness or GLOBE research program. The GLOBE research program was first conceived by Robert J. House in a study involving 17,300 middle managers from 951 organisations in the food processing, financial services, and telecommunications services industries. In 2004, its findings were published in ‘Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies’.

In the study, GLOBE placed 60 of the 62 countries into country clusters, similar to those used by Ronen and Shenkar (1985) (see Figure 1). Ten country clusters were formed, including Confucian, South East Asian, Germanic and Anglo country clusters. Countries forming the Confucian cluster include China, South Korea and Japan. The Anglo country cluster includes the United States, Australia and England. Consistent with the contingency theory of leadership, one of GLOBE's major finding is that leader effectiveness is contextual. That is,
effective leadership styles very much depend on culture or the values, beliefs and norms of
the people being led. Notably for this study, across all 62 societal cultures, the Confucian
cluster was the most likely to associate effectiveness with leaders who are team-oriented. In
contrast, the Germanic and Anglo clusters were most likely to associate effectiveness with
leaders who are performance-oriented and participative (Javidan et al. 2004).

The GLOBE findings appear to confirm results from earlier studies on leadership in different
cultures. For example, Dorfman et al. (1997) conducted a study on the preferred leadership
styles in five countries, namely, the United States, Mexico, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.
The results were intriguing. First, all the respondents were appreciative of the supportive
leadership styles. Without exception, all the participants wanted their managers to show
concern and interest. One way to show interest and concern was to attend to the many
employee issues at work. Second, participative and directive leadership had different
outcomes for different countries. Employees from Mexico and Taiwan were much more
satisfied with and committed to the directive leadership style. In contrast, employees from the
United States overwhelmingly favoured the participative leadership style. Dorfman et al.
(1997) attribute the difference to power distance. The idea is that in high power distance
cultures, authoritarian and directive leadership is more likely to be accepted. On the other
hand, in more egalitarian cultures employees are more likely to want to have a voice in
decision-making.

Dorfman et al.’s (1997) study results are consistent with Hofstede’s (1984, 1986) observations
that in high power distance cultures like East Asia, the ideal manager is seen as authoritarian
and familial. Employees expect their managers to look out for them like close family
members. They also expect to be told what to do. In contrast, in individualist, low power
distance cultures such as the United States or the United Kingdom, the ideal boss is described
as democratic and participative. As a result, employees expect to be consulted when making
decisions. The major theme coming forth from the literature is that different cultures have
different ideas on what leaders should do and how they should behave. Various studies
suggest that the collectivist high power distance cultures prefer the directive and supportive
leadership styles. The individualist low power distance cultures, on the other hand, prefer the
participative leadership styles. The difference lies mainly with differences in values and
beliefs on group membership and hierarchy. These differences, if not addressed adequately,
can lead to serious misunderstandings at work.
2.7 Cultural convergence, divergence and crossvergence

Before reviewing the literature on Vietnamese culture and communication, Ralston’s study on cultural convergence, divergence or crossvergence warrants examination. The results of Ralston's research studies on Asian cultures including China, Japan and Vietnam provide useful insights for this study. The theories of convergence and divergence were first developed by Webber (1969). Convergence theory proposes that employees in the market economy will eventually adopt common or uniform work values and practices. In Webber’s work, these common values invariably refer to Western capitalist work values and practices due to their dominance in world business and trade for the last 100 years or more (Ralston 2007).

According to this theory, even employees from countries with collectivist or socialist inclinations like Vietnam, will adopt individualist work values and practices, once they joined the market economy. In contrast, the divergence theory proposes that managers will maintain their own cultural values and identities even when their country embraces the market economy or capitalism. A third theory, crossvergence theory, put forward by Ralston to provide an alternative to the two polar opposites, proposes that the managers will pragmatically adopt a value system that is a combination of their national culture and the Western individualist culture. In his studies on Asia, Ralston finds crossvergence more prevalent and more entrenched than either convergence or divergence. For example, in 1992, Ralston studied a group of managers from China, Hong Kong and the United States. Using both Western and Eastern measures, Ralston et al. (1992) find that the work values of the Hong Kong managers did not converge with the British or the Chinese managers’ work values. Contrary to expectations, the Hong Kong managers were inclined to follow a set of values that is a mix of traditional Chinese and contemporary English culture.

In 1999, Ralston conducted another similar study, this time on 724 managers from North and South Vietnam, southwest and south China and the United States. Ralston, Nguyen and Napier (1999) decided on China and Vietnam because they not only share a common cultural heritage (Confucianism), but they also share a common social, economic and political ideology (socialism). The study segregated the two regions of China because earlier studies had suggested that they differ significantly in terms of values, with the southwest region being more ‘traditional’ and the South region being more ‘cosmopolitan’ (p. 659). Similarly, Vietnam was segregated due to their differences in history and modus operandi.
The results of this study were revealing. As expected, the American managers were found to be the least collectivist of all. At the other end of the spectrum, the Vietnamese managers were found to be most collectivist. Both the northern and southern Vietnamese managers were found to be more traditional and conformist than the rest of the group. Ralston, Nguyen and Napier (1999) attributed this to Vietnam’s slower integration with the world economy. Vietnam only started on the path to a market economy in the 1980s, some ten years later than the Chinese. At the same time, the study also found the northern Vietnamese managers to be comparatively individualist. Ralston, Nguyen and Napier (1999), however, put this down to the influence of neighbouring cosmopolitan China.

The results of all the studies conducted persuaded Ralston, Nguyen and Napier (1999) and Ralston (2007) to conclude that when developing Asian countries adopt a market economy, the work values of their managers will crossverge rather than converge. That is, their managers will not only embrace the individualist values underlying the market economy but they will also hold on firmly to deeply-held Confucian principles. Like the Hong Kong managers, the cosmopolitan Chinese and the northern Vietnamese managers incorporated both traditional Confucian values and newfound capitalist values to create a unique value system that drives their workplace behaviours, goals and aspirations.

2.8 Vietnamese workplace culture and communication

Other than Ralston, Nguyen and Napier’s (1999) study, relatively little research has been done on Vietnamese workplace culture. Further, the majority of these studies are qualitative in nature. In this section, several of these studies are reviewed, starting with the quantitative studies first.

One quantitative study of note that involved the Vietnamese managers was conducted by Onishi and Bliss (2006). The study explores the ‘Asian way’ of managing conflict with Japanese, Thais, Vietnamese and the Hong Kong managers. Consistent with Trubisky et al.’s (1991) findings on collectivist cultures, Onishi and Bliss (2006) find the sample managers were inclined to avoid conflict. Nevertheless, the extent of their conflict avoidance diverged considerably. The Vietnamese managers in particular showed a greater inclination for competition than either the Thais or the Hong Kong Chinese. Contrary to expectations, they appeared more willing to argue for what they felt was right and to defend the position they were taking.
Onishi and Bliss’s (2006) findings appear to correspond to Thang et al.’s (2007) observations that Vietnamese employees, contrary to popular opinions, can be rather independent and that they are more than willing to express their own opinions and resist imposed ideas if given the opportunity.

In another quantitative study done by Quang and Vuong (2002), 113 Vietnamese managers in state owned enterprises (SOE), private enterprises (POE) and joint ventures (JV) in Hanoi were surveyed. The purpose of the study was to determine the Vietnamese management style and leadership characteristics. These researchers came up with a number of intriguing findings. First, managers in the SOEs were inclined to be bureaucratic (focusing on rules and regulations), authoritarian (emphasising discipline) and familial (stressing allegiance to the company). The managers in the POEs were similarly inclined to use the familial or paternal management style. Only the managers in joint ventures were open to the participative approach to managing their employees.

Quang and Vuong attribute the managers’ inclinations to adopt familial or paternal management styles to the Vietnamese value of the collective and their respect for hierarchy. They note that in families, children are expected to show respect to parents whilst the parents are expected to care for their children. This Confucian mutual obligation philosophy is invariably carried over to the workplace. Zhu (2003) similarly talks about the traditional management pattern in Vietnam as one of paternalism, where managers and employees are regarded as close family members with the attendant duties and responsibilities. However, Zhu (2003) adds that this practice is being challenged in modern Vietnam. The younger and more educated employees today display greater readiness to abandon this paternal relationship for better opportunities elsewhere.

Turning to qualitative research on the Vietnamese workplace, one study that is especially relevant to this research is ‘Working in a Vietnamese Voice’, by Lady Borton. Through her extensive experience working with Vietnamese employees, Borton (2000) reveals several insights on Vietnamese work culture and communication. First and foremost, she talks about the importance of having right relationships at work in Vietnam. Corresponding with Confucian doctrines, everyone has a place and position in the family or in the organisation. Along with that place come duties and responsibilities. One of the duties includes showing proper respect where it is due. The key principle is to ‘show others more respect than they apparently deserve’ (p. 21).
One way to show respect in such a culture is to be implicit and indirect. Hwa-Froelich and Westby (2003) note that in collectivist cultures such as Vietnam, less powerful individuals, due to age or positions are expected to communicate in a respectful manner. Respect means speaking in a soft voice, with downcast eyes, and using indirect, implicit language (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988). Borton (2000) similarly finds Vietnamese employees are inclined to be implicit and indirect. This indirectness is reflected in how they structure their conversations. Typically, Vietnamese employees elaborate on context first, using proverbs, parables and anecdotes before articulating their main point. According to Borton, this ‘beating around the bush’ (p. 22) is a process essential to building relationships and trust. In contrast, they often find the direct form of communication preferred by the foreign managers to be rude, offensive and arrogant (Borton 2000, Ashwill & Thai 2005).

Another form of indirectness that Borton (2000) speaks of is the inability or unwillingness of Vietnamese employees to say ‘no’. According to Ellis (1995, p. 150), Vietnamese employees are more likely to ‘smile, nod, change the subject or avoid the subject altogether’ than to say ‘no’. Or they may even feign ignorance in order not to give an answer that may upset the foreign manager. Generally, the employees’ reluctance to say no can be attributed to their desire to not offend or show disrespect. The belief is that saying no will only cause a loss of face, and for the Vietnamese losing face can be particularly distressing. The Vietnamese inclination for indirectness, however, can present a problem. Hieu (2013), in his study on joint ventures in Vietnam, notes that the employees’ reticence in saying no, for example, often results in misunderstandings and conflict with foreign managers at work.

Berrell, Wright and Hoa (1999) conducted one of the first qualitative studies on cross cultural management in Vietnam. They conducted interviews with 10 Australian and 26 Vietnamese managers in Australian-owned companies. A number of their observations are pertinent to this study. Like Quang and Vuong (2002), Berrell, Wright and Hoa (1999) observe that the Vietnamese managers were particularly tolerant of hierarchy or high power distance, especially when compared with their Australian counterparts. For example, these researchers observe that the Vietnamese managers rarely, if ever, question or challenge higher authority, and they expect the same from their subordinates. Managers in Vietnam apparently are expected to provide direction to employees. At the same time, employees are expected to follow and not ask too many questions. Thang et al. (2007, p. 120) likens this situation to the old Vietnamese proverb of ‘quan tu than tu, than bat tu bat trung’ (if kings say die you must die).
Nevertheless, Risher and Stopper (2000) contend that the high power distance label tagged onto the Vietnamese managers may be a little superficial. They cite the difference in decision-making approaches between American and Vietnamese managers. Typically, the American manager will consult the employees, but is generally expected to make the final decision. Once the decision has been made, however, the employees are expected to support the decision, even if they don't agree with it. Vietnamese managers, on the other hand, are generally disinclined to make decisions alone. Reflecting their collectivist orientation on the one part and their socialist inclination on the other, Vietnamese managers often seek consensus from employees before making decisions (Risher & Stopper 2000; Zhu 2003).

Borton (2000) similarly notes that Vietnamese managers will spend an inordinate amount of time talking things over with their employees and seeking agreement. Nonetheless, Borton notes that comprehensive consultation or xin phep is less about sharing power, and more about showing respect and being in a ‘right relationship’ with employees. It is also a way for the managers to gain advice, help and support from their employees. Unlike American managers, Vietnamese managers cannot expect support if consensus is not reached. Contrary to opinions, observation of hierarchy or power distance in Vietnam does not give license to the managers to tell the employees what to do or raise their voices against them. Borton (2000) points out that the foreign managers who put themselves on a pedestal because of their knowledge and income are unlikely to secure their employees’ cooperation or help.

The other observation that Berrell, Wright and Hoa (1999) make is that Vietnamese managers are oriented towards being rather than doing (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck 1961). Berrell, Wright and Hoa (1999) compared Australian and Vietnamese managers’ orientations towards tasks. Whilst the Australian managers appeared to always want to ‘hurry things along’ and ‘make things happen,’ the Vietnamese managers were quite content to ‘just let things happen’ and ‘not worry too much about things’ (Berrell et al. 1999, p. 584). Compared to the Australian managers, the Vietnamese managers appeared reluctant to change things around and were happier to keep things as they were, to maintain status quo. Risher and Stopper (2000, p.8) similarly note that the ‘employees’ sense of urgency to make things happen is slight.’ The general idea is that things do happen in Vietnam, but only ‘step by step’ or ‘slowly, slowly.’ Nonetheless, Thang et al. (2007) assert that the Vietnamese employees can exhibit initiative and urgency if given the right incentive. Generally, blaming others for one’s own failure is not appreciated. In contrast, personal growth and learning is always a good motivator for the employees to take urgent action.
In 2007, Thang et al. conducted a study on the transferability of international human resource management (IHRM) practices to Vietnam. They looked at the cultural assumptions underlying several international human resource management practices and determined their applicability in the Vietnamese context. Several of their observations are revealing, particularly those on employee feedback and participation. One of the most common tools or work practices to manage the performance of the employee is goal setting and feedback. Thang et al. (2007, p.123) explain that traditional Vietnamese culture has always been open to feedback. The belief is ‘nhan vo that tan’ or ‘people are not perfect’ and ‘nguoi che ta ma che dung la thay ta’ or ‘those who criticise us correctly are our teachers.’

Nevertheless, Thang et al. (2007, p. 119) also explain that giving and receiving feedback in Vietnam can be complicated, given their propensity for indirectness and face saving or ‘mat mat’. Face saving generally refers to maintaining a positive self-image or avoiding an embarrassing situation. When giving a less than positive feedback, it is most important to try and ‘save’ the employee’s face. One way of saving face is to make sure that negative feedback is always communicated discreetly or indirectly, as much as possible (Borton 2000; Smith & Pham 1996), so that there is little potential for loss of face.

Thang et al. (2007) and Tuan and Napier (2000), however, note that feedback in Vietnam is not always subtle and indirect. The Vietnamese can be very direct with feedback when they want to be. In general, direct feedback is a function of a number of factors, including group membership, the intimacy of the relationships, and the power distance between parties. First, feedback can be direct between in-group members. Apparently, critical feedback will only cause employees to lose face when it is given by an out-group member. On the other hand, when an in-group member (including the manager) gives critical feedback, it will be readily accepted because it is seen as a show of concern.

Second, feedback can be direct if there are good relations. Thang et al. (2007) point to the imperative of a ‘getting to know you’ period before employees can be direct with feedback. Borton (2000) pointed out that Vietnamese employees tended to be indirect at the beginning, but once a close relationship was established they were more likely to be direct with feedback. Third, feedback can be direct when there is no prevailing sense of hierarchy. Thang et al. (2007) observe that the local employees are more likely to be frank with their subordinates than their peers. They are also more likely to be direct with their peers than with their superiors. This can be traced back to their adherence to hierarchy.
Thang et al. (2007) also examined employee participation or the employees’ involvement in the organisations’ decision-making and problem-solving processes. Employee participation requires the employees to engage with the managers through discussions and debate. Thang et al. (2007) observed the local Vietnamese employees’ inclination to participation. Given the opportunity, the employees will often have their own ideas about things and they will be quite motivated to get involved in discussions, so much so that there are often disagreements. Thang et al. (2007, p. 120) liken this familiar situation to the old Vietnamese proverb, ‘9 người 10 ý’ or ‘9 persons 10 opinions.’

Nonetheless, like feedback, employee participation and involvement in Vietnam is a function of good relations. Generally, the closer the manager is to the employee, the higher the level of participation and contribution the manager can expect from the employee. Thang et al. (2007) observed that at the start, the Vietnamese employees will be reserved, and will be unlikely to engage in discussions or contribute their ideas and opinions. Borton (2000) similarly recognised the Vietnamese reserved disposition. As such she advocates closer relations to get the employees to open up. She insists that the Vietnamese employees are only likely to contribute when there are close relations between the manager and the employee.

Employee participation is also a function of trust. Thang et al. (2007) and Truong (2013) observe that the Vietnamese managers do not trust easily. Ordinarily, the managers will take the employees through a series of tests and observe them. The idea is the managers should not trust their employees until trust is earned. On the part of the employees, they will naturally reciprocate the managers’ lack of trust. One way they can do this is by holding off any attempts to commit or engage at work until they feel they can similarly trust the managers. Finally, employee participation is a function of the management practices adopted. Truong (2013) and Zhu (2003) note that state-owned companies are generally characterised by central planning, including close supervision and direction. Goals and strategies will invariably be made at the top, and only filter down to the employees as plans and objectives with little input from the employees. Consequently, employees who work in these companies will have had little experience or inclination to participate.

Nonetheless, getting the local employees’ participation and contribution is most important, and will go a long way in gaining their ‘buy in’ to managements’ decisions and programs. Borton (2000) and Thang et al. (2007) warn that local employees are unlikely to accept imposed ideas. They are more likely to adapt than to adopt foreign beliefs and work practices.
Generally, the literature points to local employees holding onto a work culture that is collectivist, hierarchical and focused on uncertainty avoidance. However, there are a number of studies that point to the contrary. Quang (1997) and Nilan (1999), for example, find that local employees are increasingly pursuing individual goals and individual achievements. Similarly, Thang et al. (2007) and Zhu (2003) find that the social relations governing Vietnam are becoming more egalitarian than hierarchical.

In short, it would be erroneous to typecast Vietnamese culture as a stereotypical East Asian collective, hierarchical culture. It is definitely more complex and multifaceted. Rowley and Truong (2009) point out that Vietnam today is the result of a mix of cultural influences, including the Chinese who focus on close relations and hierarchy, the French who advocate egalitarianism, the Americans who promote materialism, and the socialists who encourage collective responsibility and decision-making.

2.9 Organisational culture

Organisational culture is also relevant to this study, since culture can refer to the nationals of a country or the employees of an organisation. Whilst national culture refers to the values and norms of a group of nationals, organisational culture refers to the values and work practices of a group of employees in an organisation (Hofstede 1984). Organisational culture has also been described as values and assumptions that employees adopt to deal with the environment, internally or externally (Schein 1984). Generally, older members tend to embrace organisational culture as a matter of course. New members on the other hand must learn and accept the new culture.

Culture is important for companies because it provides a means for them to control and manage their subsidiaries (Schneider 1988). This is especially important for companies who have affiliates and subsidiaries in several different countries. Due to the disparate work practices in different countries, international companies often face tremendous difficulties controlling their subsidiaries. Organisational culture provides the company with a useful tool to rein in errant subsidiaries. The firm can use it to instill values and dictate behavioural norms in their subsidiaries, enforcing ‘the way things are done around here’ (Schneider 1988, p. 232). As such, strong culture has been advocated by a number of researchers. Peters and Waterman (1982), for one, contend that excellent companies have very strong cultures. They point out that companies with strong cultures have less need for cumbersome rules, policies
and procedures. Basically, with a strong culture, employees know what they have to do without anyone telling them, and this increases their effectiveness.

Various evidence suggests that companies and their affiliates tend to take on the culture of their home country no matter where they operate. For instance, American firms embrace their home culture of individualism, and Japanese firms adopt their home culture of collectivism. In fact, research suggests that international companies can only manage and conduct their business inside their home culture. For example, Chandler (1990) and Kogut (1991), in their studies of international Japanese firms, contend that international companies naturally carry with them the work values, practices, systems and structures from their home countries. Tallman (1991) supports this view when he finds distinct differences in work practices and strategies between Japanese and European automobile firms in the United States, and concluded that foreign companies are naturally shaped by their home countries.

Strong organisational culture, however, presents issues of applicability or relevance. There is much debate among cross-cultural researchers on the usefulness of home country cultural practices in other countries. Many researchers contend that international companies’ propensity to hold on to home country work values and work practices is detrimental to their chances of succeeding abroad. They maintain that business performance is much better served when the company matches its work culture and work practices to the national culture of the host country they operate in. The argument is that in their subsidiaries firms should adapt work practices that reinforce rather than contradict the national culture of the host country (Earley 1994; Hofstede 1980). Schneider (1988) contends that when there is a match between the organisation’s work culture and the host country’s national culture, the work practices of the organisation will likely be accepted, but when there is a poor match, there is every chance that the work practices will be opposed and work performances affected.

Likewise, Newman and Nollen (1996) observe that when work practices are inconsistent with the employees’ deeply held values, they are less likely to feel satisfied and less likely to perform. In their study of 176 European and Asian work units of a US-based MNC, they find that the work unit’s performance was higher when the work practices applied were compatible with host country national culture. For instance, work units in low power distance cultures performed better when they encouraged participation from their employees. Conversely, work units in high power distance cultures performed better when they applied closer supervision. Other researchers, however, argue that maintaining distance between organisational culture
and host country national culture may actually enhance the performance of the international company. Lee and Yu (2004) for example note that maintaining a common culture among the disparate subsidiaries (albeit the home country culture) enables the firm to structure relationships and transfer knowledge within the organisation more effectively.

Another issue with strong organisational culture concerns compliance. Through training, MNCs typically require all members, regardless of nationality, to adhere to the set of work values and practices espoused by the firm, which invariably reflect the MNC’s home national culture. More often than not, if employees are not able to fit into the culture, they are compelled to leave, or they feel so alienated that they leave voluntarily. Those who remain in the organisation must adhere to the prescribed culture. This persuaded Hofstede (2001) to conclude that differences between national and organisational culture are those concerning values (national culture) and work practices (organisational culture). Hofstede (2001) contends that what holds a group of nationals together, such as American nationals, is the set of common values they hold. But what holds a group of employees together, such as IBM employees, is the set of work practices they share. Hofstede’s (1980) study on IBM employees was a good case in point. The study found considerable differences in values and beliefs, but comparable work practices among IBM employees in different national subsidiaries. For example, an IBM employee from Malaysia would exhibit similar work behaviours as his/her counterpart in England but would, at the same time, hold onto a different set of values and beliefs. The IBM employees were able to hold onto their national cultural identities even when outwardly, they seemed to conform to their organisation’s values and practices. Through training the IBM employees had been socialised to adhere to IBM's work practices even if they did not necessarily embrace the values underlying them.

According to Hofstede (2001) the reason for this is obvious. Whilst national cultures are learned from an early age from the family or from school, organisational cultures are only learned during adulthood at work. Laurent (1986) adds that organisational culture does little to modify national culture. He even warns that when organisational culture and national culture conflict with each other, national culture may prevail over organisational culture. In summary, to remain in the company, employees often have to comply with ‘the way things are done around here,’ (Schneider 1988, p. 232) even if they have little conviction concerning what they are doing. This may result in work practices being followed halfheartedly, or practices being roundly criticised and ridiculed inwardly.
2.9.1 National culture vs organisational culture

As discussed earlier, foreign managers, due to their training, will tend to take on the values or at least the work practices of the companies they are working for (Hofstede 2001). These work practices in turn reflect the company’s home national culture. For example, if the companies they are working for is American, regardless of their nationality, the expatriate managers in HCMC will tend to adopt the American work culture and practices. On the flip side, local employees will have their own set of values and norms which can be markedly different to the norms of the company’s home country. Due to the different values, beliefs and behavioural norms observed by the foreign managers and their local employees, various issues and concerns will inevitably surface when they interact and communicate. These concerns will be particularly acute when the differences in values, beliefs and practices are large.

A comprehensive meta-study by Ronen and Shenkar (1985) found that countries with similar religious systems, language and geographical location tend to share similar cultural traits. Based on previous empirical research done on work values, they developed a set of country clusters based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. According to this model, Vietnam, or South Vietnam as it was known, fell into the Far Eastern country cluster with Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Phillipines and Malaysia. According to Ronen and Shenkar (1985), countries in the Far East cluster are typically high in power distance and high in collectivism. Vietnam was not included in Hofstede's original IBM or subsequent studies, but through observations and descriptive information, Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) made an estimate of the cultural dimensions scores for Vietnam. The estimate was generally consistent with Ronen and Schenker’s (1985) country cluster theory and confirmed Vietnam as a high power distance and collectivist culture (see Figure 2.5).

Of particular significance for this study is the difference between the Anglo country cluster and the Far East country cluster. The two clusters remain polar opposites in the individualism-collectivism dimension, with countries in the Anglo cluster such as the United States and Australia being highly individualistic and countries in the Far East cluster such as Vietnam and Korea being much more collectivistic. Differences in the other dimensions, however, maybe less pronounced presently due to the relentless rise of globalisation. Nonetheless, they remain considerable and difficult to bridge. Countries in the Far East cluster continue to emphasise high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance whereas countries in the
Anglo country cluster continue to emphasise low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance. The characteristics of country clusters are summarised in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 Country cluster model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Power distance</th>
<th>Individualism</th>
<th>Uncertainty Avoidance</th>
<th>Masculinity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo: UK, USA,</td>
<td>Low–medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low–medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada, Australia,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far East: Thailand,</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low–medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam, Indonesia,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan, Singapore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ronen and Shenkar (1985)

The difference in cultural characteristics between the Anglo and Far Eastern countries presents a unique problem in Ho Chi Minh City. In the past decade, HCMC has seen an influx of foreign companies in the services sector, a considerable number of which lie within the Anglo country cluster. Further, these companies tend to bring with them their own sets of managers. According to Chandler’s (1990) and Kogut’s (1991) assertions, these English- or American-based companies and their managers will take on the companies’ home cultural practices which emphasise individualism, equality and competition. This invariably clashes with the local employees’ own sets of cultural practices that emphasise collectivism, hierarchy and cooperation (Ronen & Shenkar 1985).

In this scenario, both managers and employees find themselves in a very uncomfortable position, working with others who have very different values or norms from their own. This inevitably raises issues, problems and concerns at work, some of which are related to communication. In this study, the researcher examines the foreign managers’ and local Vietnamese employees’ experiences of communication in Anglo-based companies in HCMC. This study explores, from the perspectives of the participants, their concerns when communicating at work.
2.10 Conceptual framework

This study follows previous quantitative studies conducted in Vietnam (Trung & Swierczek 2009; World Bank 2008, 2012) that maintain that communication remains a major concern in international workplaces in Vietnam. The focus of this study, however, is on exploring both the foreign managers’ and local employees’ perspectives, namely, what they perceive as problems or concerns. This study explores more deeply what the concerns are, why they are concerns, and how they are concerns, and just as importantly, it explores how the concerns can be addressed. Data collected from the field is analysed based on the theories discussed in this review that relate to culture, communication and leadership.

The conceptual framework for the present study uses the communication process model illustrated in Figure 2.2 (see p. 12) as a platform. The model depicted in Figure 2.2 provides the basis for analysing and interpreting the data collected. The purpose of this study is mainly exploratory – it seeks to better understand the research situation under investigation. The other purpose is to develop theory that explains ‘what is going on’ or ‘what is happening’. This involves identifying the variables and moderating factors contributing to the research situation.

Grounded theory was the approach selected because it provides the researcher with a rigorous and systematic procedure for analysing and collecting data. Grounded theory was also selected because it facilitates theory generation to explain what is happening on the ground (Creswell 2007). In the present study, the primary interest is in what the participants perceived as problems or concerns and how they resolved their concerns. In sum, grounded theory was selected because it affords the researcher a better understanding of the research situation in order to identify better work practices.
CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the workplace communication experiences of a sample of foreign managers and local Vietnamese employees. The focus is on understanding the concerns they have when communicating at work. The aim is to provide insight into the communication issues in international workplaces in HCMC. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What did the foreign managers and employees perceive to be problems or concerns when communicating at work?
2. What did they do to address their concerns?
3. What are the implications for practice?

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on culture and communication and identified key issues pertaining to the study. This chapter describes the study’s research design and is divided into the following sections: (a) research paradigm (b) research method (c) research approach (d) overview of the grounded theory research approach (e) description of the research process (h) issues of trustworthiness (i) ethical considerations. The chapter structure is outlined in Figure 3.1.

3.2 Justification for the research paradigm

Guba and Lincoln (1994) point out that there must be a good fit between the research topic and the research paradigm, as this ultimately determines how the research study is conducted. As Bryman (1988, p. 4) emphatically states, the paradigm dictates for the social scientists ‘what should be studied, how research should be done, how results should be interpreted’. The two paradigms that have guided most research studies are the positivist and interpretivist paradigms, which simply represent alternate views of reality. Whereas the positivist stance holds that there is only one reality, and that the researcher must remain at a distance from values and beliefs being studied, the interpretivist researcher would point out that no research can be complete without understanding the meanings attached to an event or a social situation.
Figure 3.1 Structure of Chapter 3

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Justification for the research paradigm

3.3 Justification for the research method

3.4 Justification for the research approach

3.5 Overview of the grounded theory approach

3.6 Research process

3.7 Establishing trustworthiness

3.8 Ethical consideration

Source: Developed for this research study
The ontological, epistemological, and axiological differences of the two paradigms are summarised in Table 3.1. Of the two paradigms, the interpretivist paradigm was considered most appropriate for this study. Given that the aim of this study is to explore the foreign managers’ and local employees’ experiences of workplace communication, and what they perceive to be problems, issues or concerns when communicating with each other at work, the positivist paradigm was rejected. The choice of an interpretivist paradigm is further justified by consideration of appropriate methodology for this study. Whereas the positivist researcher’s primary task is to collect data, test them, and ultimately explain the laws and principles underlying a phenomenon, the interpretivist researcher’s main task is to understand the meanings constructed (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). Given that this research seeks to explore the meanings of experiences with communication of participants with very different cultural and educational backgrounds, it was assumed by the researcher that they would attach very different meanings to their communication experiences. Only with the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm can this study fully access these meanings.

**Table 3.1  Positivist paradigm vs interpretivist paradigm**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interpretivist</th>
<th>Positivist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontology (What is reality like?)</td>
<td>Many different realities</td>
<td>Only one reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reality is the result of interaction</td>
<td>Reality is detached from values and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology (What is the relationship between the researcher and the research subject?)</td>
<td>Researcher remains close to the research subject to gain better understanding</td>
<td>Researcher distances himself or herself from the research subject to remain objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiology (What is the role of values?)</td>
<td>Research findings are influenced by the researcher’s values</td>
<td>Research findings are free from the researcher’s beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Focus is on description, understanding and interpretation</td>
<td>Emphasis on predicting, controlling and generalizing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3 Justification for the research approach

Qualitative research has been closely linked to the interpretivist paradigm (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). Qualitative methodology was adopted for this study, because the focus is on the meanings participants attach to their experiences of social events or situations, rather than on measurement of data, as would be the case with quantitative research (Merriam 2009). Van Maanen’s (1979, p. 520) definition of qualitative research, clearly justifies the suitability of this approach for this study when he describes it as ‘the array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of naturally or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world’. Merriam (2009) and Bryman and Bell (2007) concur with this view, but the latter also cautions that the focus of qualitative research should be on the research participants’ perspective rather than the researchers’ perspective.

To gain access to meanings, the primary research instrument for qualitative research is the researcher himself (Creswell 2012). Only the qualitative researcher, through in-depth interviews and close observation, can adequately assess how the participants understand and make sense of their experiences of a situation. Surveys and questionnaires, on the other hand, are more suitable for use by the quantitative researcher to test and measure the occurrences of incidents or events in a social setting. To be able to properly access the participants’ perspectives, qualitative studies should also be flexible (Creswell 2009). The data collection methods such as the interview participants, the interview questions, and the sites for the interviews should all be adaptable to gain insight to the participants’ perspectives.

Data analysis in qualitative research is often inductive, at least at the start of a study. Qualitative researchers are focused on collecting data from the ground up to build concepts and theories (Merriam 2009). In direct contrast, quantitative researchers are more focused on deductively testing theories. Quantitative data and reports are also considered ‘hard’, because they tend to be clear and precise due to their focus on testing and measurement (Bryman & Bell 2007). Due to the focus on meanings, however, qualitative data and reports are thick and descriptive (Ritchie & Lewis 2003), which underlines the suitability of a qualitative approach for this study. The contrasting assumptions and focus of qualitative and quantitative research, and implications for research design, data collection and analysis are summarised in Table 3.2.
Table 3.2 Qualitative vs quantitative research methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Quantitative Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical assumptions</td>
<td>Interpretivism/constructivism</td>
<td>Positivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research focus</td>
<td>Attend to meanings (how and why?)</td>
<td>Focus on measuring (what and how much?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research goal</td>
<td>Describe, understand, explore meaning, generate theories</td>
<td>Explain, predict, describe, confirm, test theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>Flexible, emerging</td>
<td>Organised and structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research sample</td>
<td>Small, purposeful</td>
<td>Large, random, representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Interviews and observation are the primary research instruments</td>
<td>Surveys and questionnaires are the primary research instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>Inductive – bottom up, search for patterns, themes and categories</td>
<td>Deductive – top down, identify statistical relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research findings</td>
<td>Particularist</td>
<td>Generalisable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive, rich, descriptive</td>
<td>Precise, numerical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Creswell (2009, p.31); Merriam (2009, p. 18).

3.4 Justification for the research methodology

According to Creswell (2009, 2012) and Merriam (2009) there are several approaches to qualitative research. The three main approaches are outlined below. They are: phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory. This is followed by a discussion of the rationale for choosing a grounded theory approach for this study.

3.4.1 Phenomenology

Based on the writings of the 20th century philosophers, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, phenomenology is mainly concerned with ‘lived experiences’ of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). It tries to understand how people make sense of their experiences of
a phenomenon, and often focuses on the difficult human experiences of grief, anger or pain (Merriam 2009). The aim of phenomenological research is to describe experiences rather than to explain or analyse them (Moustakas 1994). Denscombe (2007, p. 76) similarly points out, it is less concerned with the consequences of a phenomenon than with ‘presenting the experiences of the phenomenon as closely as possible to the way they were experienced’. This requires the phenomenologist to provide rich and thick descriptions of what and how the phenomenon is experienced (Moustakas 1994). The end product of phenomenological research is a ‘composite description that presents the essence of the phenomenon’ (Creswell 2007, p. 62). That is, readers of a phenomenological study should be able to really feel what it is like to experience the phenomenon that is being investigated. Accordingly, common data collection methods are informal interviews with small numbers of participants.

The primary advantage of phenomenological research is that it affords deep understanding and rich descriptions of individual experiences (Denscombe 2010). A major disadvantage of phenomenological research is the time required to intimately understand participants’ experiences. Another major limitation is the subjectivity of the data, which in turn leads to questions about its reliability and validity. The researcher’s partiality or impartiality is especially difficult to detect and prevent. As Merriam (2009) argues, while ‘bracketing’ or the idea of setting aside any bias and prejudice is most important in phenomenological studies, the extent to which the researcher can do so and not affect the results of the research study is highly debatable. For these reasons, the phenomenological approach and methods were considered as unsuitable for this study.

3.4.2 Ethnography

Having its roots in anthropology, ethnographic research focuses on gaining insight and understanding of a social or cultural group (Creswell 2012). Denscombe (2007, p. 62) notes that ethnographers would carefully study the language and interaction of members of a group of people to discover how they ‘understand things, the meanings they attach to happenings, the way they perceive their reality’. Creswell (2007, p. 68) observes that the primary aim of ethnographic research is to ‘describe and interpret’ the values, beliefs, practices and behavioral norms of a social or cultural group. Accordingly, the end product of ethnographic research is an in-depth descriptive study of a group of people, made possible only by interacting with the group over a long time period (Van Maanen 1979). Like phenomenology, ethnographic studies require thick descriptions (Geertz 1973). These can come from in-depth
interviews or from daily observation. Importantly, like phenomenology, the researcher is required to reflect on his or her own values and beliefs so that they do not adversely influence the interpretation of data (Merriam 2009).

The major advantage of ethnographic research is that it yields data that are rich in depth and detail (Denscombe 2010) which provides insights into the cultural group under study. Conversely, the primary disadvantage of ethnography, as in other qualitative research studies, is the difficulty of establishing reliability. The ethnographic researcher, for example, often works alone for long periods with a cultural group. The findings obtained, as such, are often not checked or verified. With ethnography, there is also a focus on narration or storytelling that can often come at the expense of insight and theory generation (Denscombe 2010). These considerations, along with the necessity to engage with the studied group over a long period of time, means that an ethnographic methodology was not appropriate for the present study.

3.4.3 Grounded theory

The grounded theory approach was introduced in 1967 by sociologists Glaser and Strauss (Creswell 2012). It was originally designed for both quantitative and qualitative research, but recently, the approach has been associated more with qualitative research (Denscombe 2010). The grounded theory approach was developed in part to counter the many criticisms aimed at qualitative research, that it lacks rigour, especially when compared to quantitative research (Denscombe 2010). Unlike other qualitative research approaches, grounded theory takes a methodical and systematic approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation (Denscombe 2010). The same meticulously planned approach also provides grounded theory with the structure and the means to generate theory that will better explain the research situation under study (Charmaz 2006).

The fundamental principle of grounded theory is that the theory is ‘grounded in the data’ (Merriam 2009, p. 29). That is, the researcher does not start with a theory and then try to confirm it. Rather, he or she starts with a research situation and allows the underlying concepts and theories to surface from the ground up (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Charmaz (2006) points out that grounded theory provides little in terms of instructions for collecting data. However, it does afford a structured approach for analysing and interpreting qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998). As such, the researcher is able to use well-articulated rules and procedures for both data collection and analysis.
The aim of grounded theory is to generate theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 24) notes that the approach provides ‘a set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon’. Unlike other qualitative approaches, the goal is to go beyond mere description of experiences (Creswell 2012) to generate theory that will be able to explain the research situation under study. As a result, researchers frequently adopt the approach when the research area is very new. Alternatively, the approach is used when there is little that is known about the area of research because it has been ‘ignored in the literature’ or ‘given only superficial attention’ (Goulding 2002, p. 55). The approach is also used by researchers to gain new insights into an area of research that has already been well explored. These new insights can in turn be utilised to amend or to add to existing theories (Charmaz 2006).

Like all qualitative approaches, however, grounded theory suffers from the problem of subjectivity. Researchers are inevitably influenced by their own cultural and personal experiences when deciding on what findings to report and how, raising the issues of reliability and validity again (Merriam 2009). Consequently, Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasised the importance of entering a study with an ‘open mind’ or without any preconceived ideas, as the focus is on letting the theory emerge from the data, rather than forcing the researcher’s ideas into the data. However, as Denscombe (2007, p. 91) explains, an ‘open mind’ does not imply an empty mind. An open mind simply means the researcher is cognisant of existing theories but is wary of using them to interpret the collected data. This is important as it enables the researcher to discover new insights or new perspectives.

Despite its challenges and limitations, the researcher found grounded theory to be the most appropriate for this study. First, the approach allows for the generation of theory that would explain the social situation under investigation. One of the aims of this research was to extend the body of knowledge on culture and communication. Additionally, the approach affords rich descriptions of participants’ experiences of communication at work. This allows the researcher and the reader to better comprehend the meanings the participants attached to their communication experiences. Finally, the grounded theory method is consistent with this study’s interpretivist philosophical orientation (Charmaz 2006; Healy & Perry).

### 3.4.4 Glaser vs Strauss

According to Denscombe (2010) and McCann and Clark (2003) there are two alternative models for grounded theory, namely Glaser’s and Strauss’s. The two models are the result of
the schism between Glaser and Strauss, the founders of grounded theory. The schism started with Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) publication of ‘Basics of qualitative research: grounded theories and techniques’. Researchers using grounded theory need to consider which model to use to guide data collection and analysis before commencing their study proper. This section outlines key differences between Glaser’s and Strauss’ models as outlined by McCann and Clark (2003) and Denscombe (2010), and provides a justification for choosing the latter model.

Glaser (1978) argues that the researcher should always maintain some distance and independence from the data. Any findings should naturally emerge from the data. In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (1990) contend that the researcher should go beyond the obvious and look for deeper meanings in the data. This may require the researcher to go closer and use a more formal approach to analyse and interpret the collected data. As a result, the Glaser model has often been seen as more positivist in nature than the Strauss model (Denscombe 2010).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) had advised against reviewing the literature before data analysis, as this might influence how the researcher analyses and interprets the data later, and Glaser continued this way of thinking. From Glaser’s (1978) perspective, theoretical sensitivity comes from not having any preconceived notions or ideas on the subject matter. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), however, assert that reviewing the literature before data collection will facilitate the researcher's theoretical sensitivity. That is, some knowledge of the existing literature will only help the researcher gain better insight and give meaning to the data collected.

Additionally, Glaser contends that grounded theory should be flexible and follow the general principles of qualitative research (McCann & Clark 2003). In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest a more controlled and structured approach to data analysis to facilitate deeper analysis. Strauss’s suggestions, however, riled Glaser. Glaser (2001) counters that too much structure will only affect how data is analysed and interpreted. Having numerous rules and procedures, Glaser claims, may indirectly influence the researcher to force-fit the data to theory rather than allow the theory to emerge naturally.

Finally, Glaser and Strauss have quite different ideas for evaluating theory generated. Glaser (2001) contends that any theory generated must be able to explain what is happening on the ground, and just as importantly, the theory must come from the data collected. More
specifically, the data must not be forced or massaged to fit the researcher’s favourite theory. Additionally, the theory generated must be flexible and must be able to adapt to different situations. Strauss and Corbin (1990) on the other hand, contend that when evaluating theory, the grounded theorist should simply defer to the fundamentals principles of qualitative research, including credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

The Strauss model was selected for this study because it corresponds more closely with the interpretivist orientation of this study, as compared to the Glaser model (Denscombe 2010). Further, the Strauss model provides a structure that is useful for the researcher when analysing and interpreting the collected data more deeply and comprehensively. Nevertheless, the researcher has remained wary of utilising the structure provided and force-fitting the data to the theory. Moreover, the Strauss model allows for reading the literature before data collection and analysis to enhance theoretical sensitivity. Goulding (2002) notes that this is pertinent for leadership and management studies such as the present study.

3.5 Overview of the grounded theory approach

Both Glaser and Strauss models of grounded theory are characterised by a number of core elements including constant comparison, theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation, which are detailed in this section of the thesis. According to McCann and Clark (2003, p. 22), however, the difference between Glaser’s model and Strauss and Corbin's model relates mainly to the ‘degree to which these elements are adopted, rather than the substance of the elements.’ These differences are summarised in Table 3.3.

3.5.1 Constant comparison method

The constant comparative method is one of the core elements of data analysis in grounded theory. Constant comparison is a procedure in which new data is repeatedly compared against prior data. Denscombe (2007, p. 99) refers to the constant comparative method as ‘comparing and contrasting new codes, concepts and categories as they emerged and checking them out against existing ones’. By comparing data repeatedly, Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out that concepts and categories can be identified, relationships between them established, and theories generated.
### Table 3.3  Glaser model vs Strauss model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Glaser</th>
<th>Strauss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>More positivistic</td>
<td>Less positivistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Focuses on generating theory</td>
<td>Focuses on verifying and validating theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Main review to support emerging theory</td>
<td>Preliminary review to enhance theoretical sensitivity. Main review to support emerging theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research problem</td>
<td>Emerges from study</td>
<td>Personal experience. Revealed in the literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection and analysis</td>
<td>Principles and practice of qualitative research</td>
<td>Specific rules and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Fit, work, relevance and modifiability</td>
<td>Deference to canons of qualitative research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: McCann & Clark (2003, p.23)

With constant comparison, data analysis should also commence with data collection (Merriam 2009). That is, the data collected should be broken down and interpreted from the very first interviews. McCann (2003, p. 21) warns against undertaking analysis of data very late in a study as it may lead to ‘premature closure’ with poorly formed categories and theories lacking any real depth.

#### 3.5.2 Theoretical sampling

The other core element of grounded theory is theoretical sampling, to the extent that sample numbers, sample types and sample sites are all decided by emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998). Consequently, there are no definite rules on sample size. Rather, only samples that might be able to add to the emerging concepts and categories should be selected. The research questions being asked, the research participants interviewed, the research situations encountered and the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity, all play a considerable part in influencing the final sample size (Creswell 2009).
Glaser (1978) notes that at the start of a study the researcher may employ purposive sampling, that is, sampling based on predetermined criteria such as gender, experience and place of work. However, after the initial samples, further sampling decisions should be based on emerging theory. Benoliel (1996) warns that a theory that is only based on purposeful sampling will lack depth of insight. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 45) explain that theoretical sampling is the process in which ‘the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop theory as it emerges’. The idea behind theoretical sampling is to collect data that will help ‘maximise opportunities to develop concepts’ and theories (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 143).

3.5.3 Theoretical saturation

Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) contend that theoretical sampling should continue until theoretical saturation. That is, sampling should continue until no new data emerges. Or as Denscombe (2007, p. 96) puts it, when ‘new data seems to confirm the analysis rather than add anything new’, sampling should cease. Strauss and Corbin (1998) however argue that saturation is more than the absence of new data. It is also about making sure that the categories and the relationships between the categories are identified and established, which in turn, will determine sample size.

3.5.4 Theoretical sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity generally refers to the ability of the researcher to give meaning to the data. Glaser and Holton (2004) describe theoretical sensitivity as the ability to generate concepts from the data. Corbin and Straus (2008, p. 41) in turn clarify that the researcher is theoretically sensitive when he or she is able ‘to grasp meaning from the data and respond intellectually to what is said in the data in order to be able to arrive at concepts that are grounded in data’. Glaser (1978, p. 1) argues that it is most important for researchers using grounded theory to develop the necessary theoretical sensitivity to discover ‘substantive, grounded categories’.

In the main, the researcher’s background and experience, whether professional or personal, can enhance their sensitivity towards data (Corbin & Strauss 2008). Failing that, theoretical sensitivity can always be improved by reading the literature (Goulding 2002). Theoretical sensitivity can also be enhanced by utilising specific tools. Corbin and Strauss (2008) identify
a number of tools that can augment the researcher’s sensitivity, including asking questions to encourage comprehension, and carefully considering a word or an idea to gain different perspectives. Closely observing the emotions expressed by the participants and asking reflective questions can also develop the researcher’s sensitivity to emergent theories.

3.5.5 Coding

In grounded theory, data is coded prior to analysis. There are three phases in the coding process, namely open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

Open coding: Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 61) refer to open coding as ‘the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data’. Generally open coding involves coding data segments, making comparisons between them, grouping codes that refer to the same ideas, and giving them conceptual labels.

Charmaz (2006) notes that at the start, data should be coded word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence. This helps the researcher to focus on the data and not be influenced by his or her own ideas or notions about the situation under study. Nevertheless, data can be coded in large chunks or paragraphs when the researcher becomes more familiar with the data (McCann & Clark 2003).

Axial coding: Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 96) describe axial coding as the ‘set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories’. Axial coding generally entails making comparisons and grouping common concepts together to form higher order categories.

Open coding requires mainly inductive thinking to extract concepts from the data, whereas axial coding requires both inductive and deductive thinking, as the researcher has to check on the emerging concepts and categories and make sure they ‘hold up’ (Merriam 2009, p. 199).

Selective coding: Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 116) refer to selective coding as the ‘process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further development’. In selective coding a core category is identified and connected to all the other concepts and categories developed. It is also during selective coding that the categories are integrated into a theory.
3.5.6 Integrating theory

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 116) point out that the core category is ‘the central phenomenon around which all the other categories are related’. In other words, the core category is the category that is able to connect all the other categories emerging from the study. The core category is also able to explain ‘what is (really) going on in the data’ (Glaser 1978, p. 94). Corbin and Strauss (2008), however, warn against identifying the core category too early in the study. Ordinarily, the core category will only surface after a long process of coding data, making comparisons, obtaining relevant samples, and taking memos. Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 105) outline several criteria for selecting the core category including: ‘it must be abstract so that all the categories can be related to it’, ‘it must appear frequently’ and ‘it must be logical and consistent with the data’. Once the core category has been identified, however, the researcher’s focus moves on to expanding and integrating the categories to form theories. Further, any concepts and categories not connected to the core category will be removed.

3.5.7 Memoing

A key activity throughout the whole coding process is memoing. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.110) describe the memo as ‘the researcher’s record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection’. Creswell (2012), in turn, simply describes memos as notes that the researcher writes during data collection and analysis. Various researchers support the writing of memos. Corbin and Strauss (2008) for example, contend that writing memos is important because it ‘keeps a record of analysis’, ‘stimulates new insights on data’, ‘encourages the researcher to work with concepts’ and ‘provides a storehouse for idea’ (p.120). In turn, Glaser (2004) asserts that memo writing is important, as it forces the researcher to slow down and work through the categories carefully so he or she does not draw any premature conclusions about the categories or theories. Like constant comparison, memo writing should, if it is to provide its full benefits, start from the very first interviews and continue until the conclusion of the study.

3.6 Research process

This section details the application of grounded theory in this study. It details the processes the researcher undertook in collecting, analysing and presenting the data.
3.6.1 Data source

One issue that qualitative researchers have to contend with is the source of data. There are several sources of data that can be used in grounded theory research, including interviews, observations, documents, surveys, and organisational reports (Corbin & Strauss 2008). Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that there is no one data source or data collection method that is appropriate in all grounded theory research. The appropriate source of data very much depends on the purpose of the study.

For this study, in-depth interviews were deemed the most appropriate data source and this was selected as the primary source for a number of reasons. First, interviews enable the researcher to better access the participants’ perspectives on a research situation (Kvale 1996; Patton 2002). Study participants would naturally be more willing to detail their thoughts and their feelings in an interview rather than a questionnaire. The better access in turn helps the researcher gain greater insight into the participants’ experiences in the research area. Next, interviews allow for the generation of rich data. Charmaz (2006) points to the importance of rich data for qualitative grounded theory inquiry. Rich data that details the participants’ opinions and feelings are imperative to enable the researcher to analyse and interpret the research situation adequately.

Denscombe (2010) also points to the ability of the researcher to cover personal issues unique to each participant in the interviews. That is, interviews allow the researcher to ask difficult or sensitive questions that would otherwise be considered inappropriate in a survey study. Considering the subject area of this study, namely communication issues at work, being able to ask sensitive questions was very pertinent. Equally important, interviews allow the researcher to change or to add to the questions asked to clarify issues or just to check for accuracy which will only enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Denscombe 2010).

The other source of data for this study was focus groups. Focus groups are essentially facilitator-led discussion groups of four to eight people. The goal of a focus group is to encourage frank discussions between the participants of a research study. One major advantage of the focus groups is that the flexible set up generates a larger and richer amount of data than individual interviews (Keyton 2006). Another key advantage is that they generate the larger and richer data more quickly and more cost effectively than individual interviews (Stewart et al. 2007).
For this study, the focus groups provided the added advantage of substantiating and corroborating data gained from the interviews. Data gained from the focus groups was used to check and verify the themes and categories generated from the interviews. The two different sources of data used, namely the individual interviews and the focus groups, provided the researcher the means to triangulate data and thereby increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings.

3.6.2 Data sampling

Once the decisions on data sources have been made, there remain the questions of where, when and from whom to collect the data. At the start of this study, the researcher employed purposeful sampling. The researcher purposefully sought participants who were ‘information rich and illuminative’, who had experienced the research situation before and were thus able to provide useful information and insights (Patton 2002, p.46).

The criteria for the research participants, at the start of the research study, were both participants had a minimum of two years working experience with foreign managers or local employees in an English-, American- or Australian-based company in HCMC and operating in a service-related industry. A minimum of two years’ work experience was decided on by the researcher to ensure both foreign managers and local employees had the necessary experience and were able to provide useful insights on the research area. The reason for choosing English, American or Australian companies goes back to the research problem and the research questions, outlined at the start of this study. The aim of this study is to explore the foreign managers’ (specifically Anglo-trained managers) and the local Vietnamese employees’ experiences in workplace communication.

It was expected that both the Anglo-trained managers and the local Vietnamese employees would inevitably attach different meanings to their communication experiences due to their different cultural and training backgrounds. The reason for choosing the service sector was similarly intuitive; there would inevitably be more interaction between foreign managers and local employees in the services industry than in other industries, and therefore more for potential for communication issues or concerns to come to the fore.

Purposive sampling was utilised at the start of this study to seek out data relevant to the research questions. As the study progressed further, the researcher followed Glaser’s advice and replaced purposive sampling with theoretical sampling. Nonetheless, the initial criterion
of a minimum of two years’ work experience in an Anglo-based service company remained. With theoretical sampling, the researcher focused on selecting sample persons or sites to develop and to verify the categories that have already been created. For instance, the results from the first few interviews indicated that the managers were especially concerned about work communication, such as giving feedback. More samples were then taken to seek out more information, such as the type feedback desired, the reason for the feedback, and the most appropriate times and places to give feedback.

To obtain the samples, the researcher sought help from various third parties including the Malaysian Business Chamber (MBC), the Singapore Business Council (SBC), professional associations and business acquaintances. The researcher co-opted the third parties to identify and inform potential research participants of the possibility of joining the research study. Prospective participants who indicated an interest were sent emails inviting them to participate. The researcher was also careful to include the purpose of the study, the role of the participants and the interview questions in the invites.

All of the manager participants were obtained in this way. More than 60 percent of the employee participants were obtained in this way. The other 40 percent were obtained via the ‘snowball method’ in which the managers and employees interviewed were encouraged to discuss the research study with friends or colleagues whom they thought might be interested in participating. The prospective participants were given the researcher’s contact information. Only those who expressed interest and contacted the researcher were sent an email invitation.

Generally, both managers and employees were introduced to the study by someone they knew and trusted. This was especially important with the local employees. Napier, Hosley and Nguyen (2004, p. 385) point out that introductions are often critical for qualitative research in Vietnam, as the local ‘interviewees will not talk with strangers’. Only with proper introductions would the local interviewees trust the interviewer and ‘talk freely’. By the end of the study, the researcher had recruited participants from three firms in the accounting industry and two firms in the banking industry. The researcher also found participants from an advertising firm and a human resource and training consultancy.

To reflect the range of nationalities of managers working in HCMC, the researcher found sample managers from Asia, North America, Europe and Oceania. In order to gain a more balanced view of the research situation studied, the researcher sought roughly equal numbers of male and female participants.
Generally there was a concerted effort on the part of the researcher to purposefully select participants from a few sample organisations rather than many random organisations.

3.6.3 Sample size

Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue that in studies employing grounded theory, it is most important to obtain sufficient data so that the themes, concepts and categories can emerge and at the same time be verified. Denscombe (2010) contends that samples should be collected until there is no more new data in terms of concepts and categories and the relationship between them are clearly established. Consequently, in grounded theory sample size should always be dictated by evolving theory and theoretical saturation rather than any preconceived idea of representative numbers.

Nevertheless Creswell (2012) suggests a sample of 20 in order to adequately saturate the categories. Invariably, determining saturation levels is a subjective exercise. Much depends on the ability of the researcher, the ‘quality’ of the participants, and the questions asked. Nonetheless, when the participants keep referring to the same themes when responding to the questions asked, indications are some saturation has been reached. In this study theoretical saturation was deemed to have been reached with 19 foreign managers and 19 Vietnamese employees.

3.6.4 Individual interviews

The researcher used the three research questions as a framework to draft the initial interview questions, with which two pilot interviews were conducted. With insights gained from the pilot interviews, a revised set of semi-structured, open ended questions was developed. Open ended questions were used in the interviews to encourage participants to talk about the research area. Hargie and Dickson (2004) point out that research participants are more likely express their opinions, attitudes, thoughts and feelings with open questions.

On receiving a positive reply to the email invitation, the researcher called the prospective participants regarding their availability for an interview. Once the date, time and venue of the interviews were agreed on, the researcher emailed the participants the consent form and information sheet (see Appendices C & D). All participants agreed to face-to-face interviews.
The face-to-face interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient place and were tape recorded. At the start of each interview the researcher briefed the participants on the purpose of the study, what the research was about, why he or she had been chosen to participate, and how the anonymity of the data would be preserved. Next, the researcher asked the participant to review and sign the consent form. The researcher also informed each participant that the interview would be tape recorded and that he would not proceed with the interview without their approval.

Throughout the interviews the researcher took care to maintain an atmosphere of collegiality, support and trust. This was important, as it encouraged the participants to share their feelings, attitudes and beliefs on the situation under investigation. During the interviews the researcher also made every effort to minimise the extent to which he influenced the views of the participants. One key characteristic of good qualitative research is that the findings represent the participants’ perspective and not the researchers’ perspective (Bryman & Bell 2007; Merriam 2009). To ensure that the interviews only revealed the participants’ perspective of the research situation, the researcher followed Denscombe’s (2010) suggestions to remain neutral and objective by not disclosing any personal feelings or experiences about the situation being discussed and by not asking any leading questions.

Participants were asked to share their experiences of workplace communication. A set of probing questions was used to help the participants recall and recount their experiences. These questions are provided in Table 3.4.

Other questions would arise as the researcher allowed the participants to do most of the talking. As the interviews progressed the researcher was also wary of asking any questions that might offend the participants’ sensitivities. Following Napier, Hosley and Nguyen’s (2004, p. 385) advice, the researcher avoided any discussions about politics. Discussions about the government were generally off limits with the participants. The researcher also heeded Smith and Pham’s (1996) recommendations and kept away from controversial topics such as bribery, sex, religion and the Vietnam War. The interviews would end when no new information or ideas came up. Before the concluding the interviews proper, the researcher would make it a point to summarise the key points covered. The interviews with foreign managers and local employees were mainly conducted in English.
Table 3.4 Interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview schedule / protocol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What did the foreign managers/local employees perceive as a problem or a concern when communicating at work in HCMC?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What were some of the problems, issues or concerns you had when communicating with the foreign managers/local employees?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How and why was it a concern? When and where was it a concern?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the managers/employees perceive to be the reasons for the concern?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you think is the reason for your concern?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What did they do or what did they not do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the managers/employees do with the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What did you do? How did you resolve your concern?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the managers/employees want or expect the other party to do to facilitate communication at work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In your opinion what do you want the foreign managers/local employees to do to facilitate communications in the workplace?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you think makes for good communication in the workplace?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study

3.6.5 Data analysis

The researcher conducted a total of thirty eight individual interviews. Most of the interviews were audio taped. Two managers declined permission to record the interviews due to privacy concerns. With the two interviews, the researcher made sure key words and key ideas were jotted down during and after the interviews. The interviews generally lasted about an hour and fifteen minutes each. With thirty six taped interviews, there was about three thousand minutes of recording time to review and transcribe. After each interview, the contents were transcribed verbatim. Only the exact words used by the participant were recorded. More than half of the transcripts were written up by the researcher. The balance of the transcripts were done up by an assistant employed by the researcher. The transcripts made by the assistant were checked for accuracy by the researcher.
The use of the interview transcripts resulted in a large amount of data that needed to be organised and analysed. To analyse the data the researcher employed the constant comparative method which starts with reading the transcripts many times over, comparing data, coding the data, grouping similar codes to form concepts and categories, writing memos and finally generating theory. Before starting the analysis proper the researcher considered using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo to code the data. In consultation with his supervisor the researcher decided on manual coding for the following reasons. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) coding software often cannot interpret the myriad of emotions that surface during the interviews. Further, coding software often neglects the context of the data being analysed which is critical to deeply understanding them. Nevertheless NVivo was used at the end of this research study to check which and how many of the participants referred to the emerging concepts and categories. This process is illustrated in Table 4.6 in the next chapter.

After the first interview transcriptions were completed, the researcher immediately coded the raw data. There are three phases of coding with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998). The first, open coding, involves breaking down the data in order to generate concepts. In this phase the researcher pored over the printed transcripts line by line, highlighting words, sentences or phrases that appeared relevant to the research question. The highlighted word or sentences were then coded on the side margins of the transcripts. Codes that referred to the same idea were grouped together and given a conceptual label.

This procedure was repeated for all subsequent transcripts. With every new set of data, emerging and existing concepts were continually compared. At the beginning of the study the researcher coded everything to better understand the situation under investigation. As the study progressed, coding became more selective; it became more of an exercise of expanding and confirming existing concepts and categories.

The second phase of coding, axial coding, involves putting the data back together by generating and relating the categories. In this phase the researcher raised the concepts to more abstract categories. By constantly comparing data, concepts that referred to a common theme were grouped together to form higher order categories. Open coding was generally conducted alongside axial coding whilst the data were being collected and analysed. As the transcripts were coded, insights and ideas gleaned from the coding exercise were also recorded as memos.
The third phase of selective coding involves theory integration including identifying and relating the core category to the other categories. After spending a considerable amount of time analysing and asking questions of the data, the researcher found a core category that was frequently mentioned that was able to integrate and explain the relationships between all the categories (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The researcher found the core category to be ‘misunderstanding’. Once the core category was identified, the researcher moved towards integrating the theory which included removing less relevant categories and expanding on less developed categories. At this stage too, the researcher reverted fully to theoretical sampling. That is, the researcher only sought samples that were able to add to or fill in the categories in the emerging theory.

Throughout the entire coding process, the researcher utilised several tools to enhance theoretical sensitivity and improve data analysis and interpretation. First, the researcher had conducted a thorough review of the literature. This review provided ‘sensitising cues’ about the situation under study (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p. 41). When reviewing the literature, however, the researcher was always mindful of the influence this might have on data analysis. Further, informal discussions with managers and employees at various times and in various organisations provided additional sensitising cues.

Second, the researcher continually asked questions of the data. When reading the transcripts the researcher would ask what Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 72) referred to as ‘sensitising questions’ or questions that would facilitate understanding of the data, such as: ‘What is happening here?’ or ‘What are the main issues?’ When the concepts and categories began to emerge, the researcher would ask ‘theoretical questions’ or questions that would help link the concepts and categories together such as, ‘How do the concepts relate to one another?’ or ‘What is the relationship between them?’ (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p. 72).

Once a formative theory surfaced, the researcher would start asking ‘practical questions’ (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 72) or questions that would help direct further sampling: ‘Which concepts and categories are developed?’ or ‘Where or whom do I go next for more samples?’ The practical questions were invaluable as they guided the researcher in what data to collect next and where to collect them so as to develop the emerging theory. The researcher was also mindful of Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) advice that the samples taken are to be used not only to confirm existing concepts and categories, but also to look at variations in the categories.
Third, the researcher used the ‘flip flop technique’ on words or concepts used frequently by the participants. They included words such as ‘involvement’ or ‘initiative’ used by the managers and ‘respect’ or ‘understanding’ articulated by the employees. The researcher would go over the words thoroughly, turning them ‘inside out’ and ‘upside down’ to gain a fresh perspective (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 79).

Fourth, the emotions expressed and non-verbal cues displayed were taken into account when analysing the data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that any emotions and non-verbal cues displayed during the interviews are indicative of the meanings the participants attach to their experiences of a research situation. As such the researcher took pains to observe and record these expressed emotions and body language in the interviews. The insights gained from asking questions, using the flip flop technique and observing the participants’ emotional expressions and body language were all noted in the memo and incorporated in the analysis and interpretation of data.

3.6.6 Focus groups

Two focus group discussions were organised at the end of the study. One focus group involved four foreign managers and the other involved five local Vietnamese employees. Each group discussions lasted about an hour and half. The participants in the focus group were not part of the original study sample. Nonetheless, the selection of participants for the focus groups followed the same criteria and procedures as the selection of participants for the individual interviews. To ensure greater insights, participants selected for the focus groups had more than five years of experience working in multicultural settings in Vietnam.

Prior to each focus group, the researcher contacted the participants individually by phone to schedule a convenient time and place to hold the focus group. Following that, the researcher emailed the participants the same consent form and information sheet that were given to the individual interview participants. They were then asked to sign the forms and return them to the researcher at the focus groups. Before the focus groups commenced the participants were informed that the discussions would be tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher, and that if they did not agree they could always withdraw from the discussions.

The purpose of the focus group was twofold: 1) to augment the data already collected from the interviews and 2) to check on the concepts, categories and theories emerging from the
interviews and enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings. As such, during the focus groups, the participants were asked to center their discussions on the following questions, ‘What were some of the problems or concerns you faced communicating when you first started work in HCMC?’ and ‘What do you think should have been done to facilitate communication at work?’ The format of the discussions was open and free flowing. All the participants were encouraged to share their experiences. They were also encouraged to listen and add to what the others said.

3.7 Establishing trustworthiness

Denscombe (2010) and Merriam (2009) argue that all researchers must demonstrate that their findings can be trusted. For the quantitative researcher, trustworthiness has always focused on establishing 1) validity, or how accurate is the research instrument used; 2) reliability, or how consistent are the results of the research instrument; 3) generalisability, or how much can the results be generalised and 4) objectivity, or how impartial is the study (Keyton 2006). The different philosophical assumptions and research focus of the qualitative researcher, however, call for a different set of criteria for assessing trustworthiness (Merriam 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability to replace the criteria of validity, reliability, generalisability and objectivity.

These criteria have since been widely adopted for qualitative research (Merriam 2009). This section discusses how the criteria outlined by Guba and Lincoln have been fulfilled in this study to ensure trustworthiness.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility addresses the issue of alignment between findings and reality (Bloomberg & Volpe 2008; Merriam 2009). This criterion is a key component of good research design (Creswell 2009; Miles & Huberman 1994). To increase the credibility of this study, the researcher adopted a number of the strategies put forward by Merriam (2009). The strategies included:

1. Triangulation via data collection methods. The researcher triangulated data from three sources of data, namely the interviews, the focus groups and the literature. The multiple sources of data allowed the researcher to confirm and corroborate the results
of the study (Merriam 2009). Data from the individual interviews, for example, were checked against data from the focus groups. Data from the interviews were also compared against the literature. According to Glaser (2004) the literature is a valuable source of data that can be integrated into the constant comparative analysis process once the categories or themes have emerged.

2. Member checks. To avoid misrepresenting what was discussed, the researcher sought feedback from several of the research participants interviewed. Maxwell (2012) notes that member checks are important to avoid any possibility of misinterpreting what the participants have said. The researcher called on two of the managers and three of the employee participants who were previously interviewed. They were presented with the interview transcripts and a summary analysis. Their views were subsequently sought on the accuracy of the analysis. They were asked questions like: ‘Does this analysis reflect your experiences?’ , ‘How does it not reflect your experience?’ and ‘What would you like to add?’ Any agreements or discrepancies were duly noted by the researcher and incorporated into the study.

3. Peer review. The researcher found two Vietnamese colleagues who were familiar with the area of study. At any opportune moment he would discuss with them what he gleaned from the interviews. He would also query them on the various aspects of culture and tradition that he found difficult to grasp.

4. Clarifying assumptions. The researcher clarified his experiences and assumptions on the research situation right at the start of the study and continually checked on his perspectives by jotting down any ideas or insights into a notebook or memo. This exercise allowed the researcher to check for any bias or prejudice that may have adversely influenced data collection and analysis.

3.7.2 Dependability

Dependability addresses the issue of consistency between research findings and data collected (Merriam 2009). According to Denscombe (2010), to achieve dependability, researchers need to demonstrate that they have followed applicable procedures and made reasonable decisions in the course of their study. Merriam (2009), in turn talks about the need for an audit trail, which is essentially a description of how the data were collected, and how categories were derived during the study.
This audit trail enables interested researchers or readers to check and evaluate the procedures and decisions made in the study and hence assess its dependability. For his part, the researcher tried to provide as much detail as possible in the methodology chapter of this thesis regarding how data was collected and analysed in this study. Complete records of the research process including participants’ selection, field notes, interview transcripts, data coding and data analysis were kept and made available to any interested reader.

3.7.3 Transferability

Transferability addresses the issue of applicability of findings to another situation (Denscombe 2010). Merriam (2009) notes that transferability in qualitative studies is not about generalising the findings to the population, rather it is more about how the readers of the study can use the findings in a comparable situation. The researcher addressed the issue of transferability in this study by providing thick, rich descriptions (Geertz 1973) of the research situation and its context. Thick descriptions allow for deeper understanding, helping the readers of the study to transfer the findings to other similar situations.

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability addresses the issue of congruity between research findings and the participants’ perspective (Bloomberg & Volpe 2008). In essence, the researcher must ensure that the study findings represent the perceptions of the research participants and not the researcher. According to Denscombe (2010) there are two strategies for ensuring confirmability, namely clarifying one’s own beliefs and assumptions and keeping an open mind. The researcher adopted both. The first strategy was discussed in Section 3.7.1.

The second strategy refers to the researcher keeping an open mind to the possibility that he or she may misinterpret the interview data through neglect or omission. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) and Yin (2010) note that good researchers do not ignore or omit any data that does not confirm or substantiate their findings. Instead they always make sure they check on possible explanations for the inconsistent data. To avoid any incidences of misinterpretation, the researcher made sure he did not neglect any data that did not match his expectations but actively investigated them.
3.8 Ethical considerations

In any research study there are several ethical issues that need to be addressed, including informed consent, confidentiality, emotional protection and deception (Bogdan & Biklen 2003), Merriam (2009). The researcher is generally responsible for protecting the research participants from physical or emotional harm. To ensure the rights of the participants are fully protected in this study, the researcher adopted a number of safeguards, explained as follows.

Informed consent: Bogdan and Biklen (2003) contend that before the interviews proper it is most important to inform the participants of the nature of the research, including their rights and obligations. In this study, at the start of the interviews, all the participants were briefed on the aims of the study and the roles that they play. They were also informed that the interviews would be tape recorded and that they had a right to stop the interviews at any time they wanted to. Each interview commenced only with the participant’s consent.

Transparency: After each interview, the researcher made the transcripts available to the participant upon request. Only a few of the participants asked for the interview transcripts. Transcripts were emailed to those participants who did. Additionally, as prescribed by the National Statement on Ethical conduct in Human Research, an information sheet and an informed consent form were provided to all the participants before the interviews. As standard practice, these forms were sent to the participants a few days before the scheduled interviews. The information sheet contained essential information such as the aim of the research study, and what was required of the participants. Critically, it notified participants that the research study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time, that confidentiality of information would always be maintained, and that the research data would be stored in a safe and secure manner.

Confidentiality: Bogdan and Biklen (2003) similarly argue that the privacy or confidentiality of the participants must always be protected. That is, the personal information given to the researcher by the participants must always be handled in the strictest confidence. The same information used in the reports should not pose a threat to the participants’ wellbeing in any way. Merriam (2009) warns qualitative researchers to take special care as privacy can be difficult due to the small sample sizes and rich data. To ensure privacy in this study, only pseudonyms were used for the participants and the organisations they were working for. Individual participants and organisations were not identified by name on any of
the data collected, or in the doctoral thesis, presentations or publications coming from the study.

To ensure confidentiality, all completed questionnaires, taped recordings and interview transcripts were kept under lock and key in the researcher’s premises. They were only made available to participants upon request in the researcher’s premises. The records will also be kept for a minimum of seven years, consistent with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, and will be destroyed after that time.

**Emotional protection:** Bogdan and Biklen (2003) also maintain that the researcher must take care that the interviews do not cause the participants unnecessary emotional stress. This study required the participants to share their experiences of workplace communication, specifically what they perceived to be problems or concerns when communicating at work. As such, the researcher was careful not to present questions that would cause the participants undue emotional stress. He was also ready to stop the interviews if he noticed the question made the participants uncomfortable. In particular, questions that required the participants to assess or evaluate their peers or supervisors were carefully avoided. Following Napier, Holsley and Nguyen’s (2004, p. 385) questions relating to political systems, governments and favoritism were also sidestepped.
CHAPTER FOUR – DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the results from the data analysis, with discussion of the results and integration with the literature reserved for Chapter 5. This chapter begins with a profile of the respondents, followed by an outline of the coding process. Next, the results of the data analysis are presented. Analyses of the foreign managers’ responses are presented first, followed by those of the local employees. The structure of the chapter is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

4.2 Participant profiles

A total of 38 in-depth interviews were conducted with both foreign managers and local employees. The manager and employee respondents came from seven organisations in HCMC that were engaged in services such as accounting, advertising, banking and consulting. The participants ranged in age from early 20s to late 50s. The local employees were mostly in their 20s. Nevertheless, they met the required 2 year experience working with foreign managers in Anglo based companies in HCMC, so that they were able to provide the necessary insights into the research area. The foreign managers were mostly in their 30s and 40s. The managers all had extensive experience working in Anglo based companies inside and outside of Vietnam. Amongst them was one Vietnamese manager, selected to represent the foreign managers primarily because she had worked for more than 3 years as a manager in a large British Bank in HCMC, and had lived overseas for a considerable time before moving back home. Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 present the demographic data for the participants.

4.3 Data analysis and coding

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain rich data and identify emerging concepts and categories. Data was analysed using the grounded theory constant comparison method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). After each interview session, the transcript was immediately written up and analysed. Words, sentences or phrases that appeared relevant to the research question were coded on the margins of the transcripts. Codes that referred to the same idea were grouped together and given a conceptual label. This procedure was repeated for all the interview transcripts, as demonstrated in Table 4.3.
Figure 4.1  Structure of Chapter 4

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Participant profiles

4.3 Data analysis and coding

4.4 Category 1: Work roles

4.5 Category 2: Work communication

4.6 Category 3: Communication orientation

4.7 Category 4: Language

4.8 Category 5: Coping responses or strategies

4.9 Results from the focus groups

4.10 Theoretical model explained

Source: Developed for this research study
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Organisation type</th>
<th>Years in Vietnam</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>American</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Malaysian</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>41 – 50</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FM8</td>
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<td>31 – 50</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
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<td>Banking</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FM14</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>31 – 40</td>
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<td>Malaysian</td>
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Source: Developed for this research study
Table 4.2  Participant demographics – employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Organisation type</th>
<th>Years in MNE</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE2</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE3</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE4</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
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<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE5</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
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<td>LE6</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Advertising</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Accounting</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>LE9</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Banking</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE15</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Accounting</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE17</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE18</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE19</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21 – 30</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study
Table 4.3 Sample coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant comments</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Memo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So the way I do it is I try to communicate the objectives. This is what I want, this is when I need it by. How you do it, I'm not going to tell you how. You just do it whichever you want to. But what I realise after a month, is that nothing got done. Because they did not think that I was serious enough about it.</td>
<td>Don't want to tell employees how to do wants employees to think about how to do Employee not taking it seriously</td>
<td>work independence</td>
<td>work roles</td>
<td>Managers want employees to exercise more work independence. Need to think about what or how to do things. Not wait for instructions. Not getting what they want. Employees don’t think managers serious enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah. Unless we go and chase them every day and say hey, 'Where are you up to?' And when you do that, you put pressure on them. The thing is you are chasing them. So we prefer not to chase them but for them to proactively come to us and say, 'Hey just let you know, everything is going smoothly. No problem'.</td>
<td>Managers want proactive feedback Feedback on work progress Do not want to chase the employees for it</td>
<td>proactive</td>
<td>Communication orientation</td>
<td>Managers wanted feedback from the employees. Need progress feedback to know what is going on. Prefer the employees to volunteer the feedback. Do not want to chase them around for feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study

With every new set of data transcripts, the emerging and existing codes were compared. After several rounds, concepts that referred to a common idea were collapsed to form higher order categories or themes. As the transcripts were coded, insights and ideas gleaned were recorded as memos, as shown in Table 4.3. A sample of categorisation of concepts from the data is shown in Table 4.4. Twenty-one conceptual labels emerged in the open coding stage, and five categories of work roles, work communication, communication orientation, language and coping response were identified in the axial coding stage. In the final selective coding stage, the core category that was able to link all the categories and concepts was determined to be ‘misunderstanding’. What the foreign managers and local employees perceived as problems or concerns, namely expectations about work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language, often led to misunderstandings.
Table 4.4 Sample categorisation of codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work alone</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Work roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organise own work</td>
<td>independence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up on issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adhere to schedules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak up</td>
<td>Involvement/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice opinions</td>
<td>participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give suggestions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study

To address the misunderstandings the managers and employees came up with a number of responses or coping strategies. A summary of the conceptual labels and categories are displayed in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Summary of categories and sub categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories Foreign Manager</th>
<th>Sub-categories Local employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work roles</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work communication</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>Attending to concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Listening to opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>Hearing what is said or not said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication orientation</td>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Jargon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depth of understanding</td>
<td>Rate of speech and Accent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping responses or strategies</td>
<td>Reducing distance</td>
<td>Adapting to the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closer supervision</td>
<td>Keeping quiet and distance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study

The numbers of participants who referred to each of the concepts and categories are displayed in Table 4.6.
Table 4.6  Data summary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and subcategories</th>
<th>Managers who referred to this as a concern</th>
<th>Employees who referred to this as a concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work roles</td>
<td>Work roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work independence Involvement</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Work communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of understanding</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Coping responses</td>
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<td>Coping responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing distance</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer supervision</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study

In the interviews, the participants were quizzed as to what they perceived to be concerns or problems with regards to communication at work, and how they addressed them. Numerous concerns were articulated by the managers and employees. Their concerns were recorded and organised into categories or themes. They are presented in detail in the next section.
4.4 Category 1: Work roles

One theme referred to regularly in interviews with both managers and employees was a concern about work roles. Work roles can be described as duties or functions associated with a position in the organisation (Biddle 1986). They had very distinct ideas on what duties or functions that the other should assume. The managers’ perspective on work roles is presented first followed by the employees’.

4.4.1 Managers’ concern for work independence

One work role discussed by a number of managers was work independence. Work independence generally refers to the ability to work alone and not be directed or supervised by others. It is closely associated with self-reliance, self-governance and self-direction (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Discussions with the managers about their concerns revealed the importance they placed on work independence or what one manager referred to as ‘work autonomy’. Their preference for employee independence or autonomy is reflected in the following comments:

*I like to give autonomy to my staff. I hate being told what to do. So I don’t want to tell my staff what to do. So the way I do it is I try to communicate the objectives. I tell them, ‘This is what I want. This is when I need it by. How you do it, I’m not going to tell you how. You just do it whichever way you want to. (FM3)*

*I try not to tell my people how to do their work. Technically they are much better than I. So, I let them be. That’s my philosophy, to hire smart people and make sure that they know what they should be doing, and leave all the details to them. (FM1)*

Such comments indicate a desire on the part of the managers for their employees to be more work independent. They wanted them to be able to ‘organise own work,’ ‘follow up on issues,’ and ‘adhere to schedules’. Some managers, however, felt that their employees were ill-equipped.

They found their employees were often ‘waiting for directions’ and requiring ‘specific instructions’, which the managers appeared unprepared to provide on account of work demands. The following comments captured the managers’ concerns about the lack of work independence in their employees:
I try not to tell them what to do. I let them think about what they have to do first. But what I realised after a while, things don't get done. Maybe they did not think that I was serious enough about it. (FM3)

You know you are supposed to empower, you are supposed to give them the freedom to do the job alone because that's supposed to be the way ... but over here I think that does not really work. (FM10)

Concerns about work independence were particularly prevalent among managers who worked with younger, less experienced employees. A couple of managers observed that their younger employees were very diligent and hard-working, but they often required specific instructions and guidance. They pointed out that with proper direction the younger employees would be able to do their jobs very well. Without specific instructions, however, they would often muddle through. One manager put it this way:

You need to give them [new employees] direction and everything. Once you tell them the job, they are fine but by themselves they would fail if you didn’t give them specific directions. (FM12)

On the surface, the managers’ preference for work independence appeared self-interested. Work was less onerous for them if they did not have to direct and supervise their employees. However, further investigations indicated that the managers’ preference was also about how they believed things should be done. The general feeling coming from the managers was that they should not be telling the employees what to do all the time and that the employees should be more work independent, because ‘that’s supposed to be the way’. (FM10)

At the same time a number of the managers, albeit a much smaller number, expressed apprehension over workers having too much independence. These managers noted that when the employees are more experienced and more confident they are likely to ‘go their own direction’. (FM11) That is, they are likely to do things their way rather than be guided by their managers. These managers described it this way:

If they are really good at what they do, if they're quite skilled, they have pretty strong views on what they do and how to do it. (FM11)
When they become more confident in the firm ... when they become better, when they have done it many times already, they can be very insistent about the way they are doing it. And if you try to change things, they can become very difficult. (FM10)

These comments suggest that the older more experienced employees’ inclination to go their own direction could be just as challenging as the younger employees’ inclination to expect their managers to provide direction. For a minority of managers, their expressed wish was that their employees would consult with them before starting on work, or before making important decisions to prevent any costly mistakes. The interviews illustrate the importance of getting the right balance of work independence and interdependence. Getting it right is important to ensure a successful working relationship between manager and employee at the office.

4.4.2 Managers’ concern for involvement

In addition to work independence, the managers also referred to employee involvement as a concern. Involvement generally refers to the employees’ contribution in the company. Several managers called for more employee involvement. The managers observed rather warily that in meetings and discussions, communication tended to be one-way, from manager to employee. They expressed a desire for their employees to be more involved. For the managers, involvement includes ‘speaking up,’ ‘voicing opinions,’ ‘raising issues,’ and generally ‘engaging in discussions’. Getting the employees to actively contribute or get involved at work remained a challenge for managers. Typical comments included:

I’ve been here 2 years now, I still cannot get the key people to speak up and when I ask them ‘Okay, Van, what do you have to say?’ She will say something very smart, but I have to ask her to say it, you see. I have to ask her to say it and so that’s the second major challenge. My people have good ideas but they are not willing to speak them out. (FM4)

With some of the employees here, they’re already comfortable. They deal with foreigners or they deal with non-Vietnamese speaking people all the time. So for them, there’s no problem. They just kind of, ‘you got a minute?’ The others, they like, you could feel that there’s a fear in them somehow. I am like ‘just spit it out, I’m not gonna bite you. Tell me what’s on your mind.’ (FM3)

For some managers, the perception was that the employees were holding back. They felt that their employees had very good ideas and would be able to contribute to the firm, but for
various reasons hesitated to do so. A number of reasons were put forward for the employees’ hesitation to voice their ideas and opinions. One manager thought that the employees hesitated to speak up because they didn't want to ‘displease’ the managers:

The Vietnamese employees want to please the boss. They want to please the foreigner. And it would displease me, I think in their mind to tell me that they don't agree with me. (FM4)

Another manager suggested that the employees did not see giving opinions or suggestions as constructive or beneficial:

I think they are afraid it would be taken as criticism, if they say something different. They don't look at the different points of view as a process. (FM6)

Nonetheless, for the affected managers, it was important that the employees were able to articulate their ideas and opinions. The managers reasoned that the employees were local, and were more in the know and could therefore provide valuable insights. Further, there was also the issue of obtaining employee ‘buy in’. Many of the decisions made in the workplace affected the employees directly or indirectly. Ensuring the employees agreed with the decisions would certainly help allay any misgivings or resistance. For a couple of the managers, it was also about support. They reported feeling all alone at work, and that they were not getting sufficient help from their subordinates. These managers said they would have appreciated more contribution and involvement from their employees in terms of ideas and suggestions. One manager put it this way:

As a foreigner when you join a firm here, it’s very much groping in the dark. You don’t get a lot of information, you don’t get a lot of guidance or direction. You find out everything the hard way. (FM10)

Reflecting on the importance of involvement, a few managers associated involvement with ‘interest’. For these managers, when their employees actively engaged in discussions and contributed ideas and opinions, they viewed them as interested and committed. By the same token, when their employees refrained from doing so they saw them as ‘disinterested’ or worse, ‘indifferent’.
For a few of the managers, employee contribution and involvement appeared to be a prerequisite for doing well at work. One manager even warned that failure on the employees’ part to contribute may result in the employees exiting the company prematurely:

All of our staff are opinionated, we train them to have their views and be firm with their views. We need them to be like that so we train them that way. After the first year, either they change and become more vocal or they will leave. (FM3)

4.4.3 Employees’ concern for close relationships

The employees had a very different set of concerns. One was the lack of close relations. A number of the employees spoke of the distant relationships prevailing at work. Some of the comments made about foreign managers by the local employees included:

In other countries, I think they [the managers] try to keep work and relationships separate. Like, ‘I am your manager so I’m not your friend’. (LE6)

For Western people, I think, work is work, and personal is personal. (LE3)

Close relations were important to the employees. Discussions with them would eventually gravitate to the subject of close relationships, or the lack of them. The employees sought closer ties with their managers. To them a good manager was one who was ‘warm’, ‘friendly’ and ‘approachable’. From their perspective the managers were found wanting in this regard. Two employees described the stark difference between the local and the foreign managers:

I think the foreigners like to have a private life. They don’t want to share their time with the Vietnamese staff after work. I mean that’s their perspective ... but with the Vietnamese, after work they like to spend time with their colleagues. (LE12)

The staff and the managers all have a very good relationship. Especially you know like my level, because we have been working three years already. So we got to know the managers very well, and you know we almost become friends. But for the foreign managers, I don’t see them becoming friend with any staff. Maybe it’s the language barrier, because we can speak English but not that great ... and then also we don’t understand the culture. (LE6)
Close ties were important to the employees for a number of reasons. Several of the employees linked close relations to communication. For them, close manager–employee relations would translate to improved communication at work. The employees said that they would be more likely to contribute ideas or share problems at work when they had good relations with the manager. One employee explained it this way:

*My [previous] boss, he had very good social skills, like he would ask you, ‘hey, how are you?’ It made me feel like close to him. So when I have some troubles I will jump to him and say ‘I have this trouble.’ I can tell him right away.* (LE5)

A few of the employees pointed out that they were more likely to ask questions when they had close relationships with their managers:

*Sometimes Vietnamese people are afraid to ask questions of their managers because they don’t want to show that they don’t understand. So they ask their friends, colleagues or managers they have relationships with.* (LE14)

Significantly, a couple of the employees linked good relationships with involvement. That is, they said they would be more involved and supportive if there was close relations. One employee put it this way:

*The Vietnamese people ... like if you listen and build good relationships with them, they’re going to be very supportive to you. But if they don’t know you, and that is their job, they are going to do it but in the way like ‘okay, I just do my job but I will not try to help you more because I don’t know you’. (LE1)*

Apparently, it was not difficult for the managers to build close relationships with the employees. Several of the employees suggested *‘hanging out’*, such as joining the employees for after-hours dinners and drinks, and attending important family events including weddings and birthday parties. The employees also noted that at these events, the managers could learn more about their employees, as the employees often *‘exchanged information’* there.

The general impression coming from the interviews was that the employees were much more comfortable talking and discussing work in these informal events than in the rigid formal meetings and discussions that the managers were inclined to organise at work. One employee described the situation this way:
People like the Westerners don’t like to discuss work at dinner, right? I don’t know but I feel like that. But the Vietnamese people, when we have the issues at work, we bring it to dinner and we share it with others at work. (LE18)

There were a couple of dissenting views, however. One employee was not in favour of forming close relationships with managers. She remarked that it may be better for the manager to avoid mixing personal and professional relationships. She warned:

Some foreigners think that in order to know their employees better they have to go out, socialise and break the distance between employers and employees, but for me the professional managers should still keep a certain distance to maintain discipline. (LE13).

According to some employees, it is imperative that the barrier between management and employees remain in order to maintain discipline. For them, mixing personal and work relationships will only compromise management’s ability to maintain control over their employees. Another employee suggested that the managers should just focus on the job at hand rather than worry about relationships in the workplace. She said, ‘we [the employees] are paid to work and not make friends you know. (LE14)

Nevertheless, the overriding concern coming from the employees seemed to be one of close relations. For them, close relationships are critical for facilitating communication and good work performances in the office. One employee summed it up this way:

I don’t know about the other countries but the foreign managers should understand that in Vietnam relationships always go a longer way. Clear communication is important. But so is relationship. (LE6)

4.4.4 Employees’ concern for support

Like relationships, support or rather lack of support was regularly referred to as a concern in the interviews. Support generally refers to the idea that employees should be given the necessary help and assistance to enable them to perform their jobs well. The employees observed that at work the foreign managers were inclined to leave them on their own, and only checked on them periodically. Rather than closely supervising the employees, the foreign managers tended to provide them with considerable autonomy to get the job done.
Several of the employees indicated their openness to the managers’ preference for giving them work independence or autonomy. One employee pointed out that she liked the idea of being able to plan and decide on how best to do her job:

*I like him [the manager] because he lets me free, I have the right to do what I want, to manage my own work. If I need his help, he will jump in to help me. He lets me manage my own work first.* (LE18)

Another employee appreciated the opportunity to be able to learn and make mistakes:

*After reviewing my work, my manager does not think that because you have done not good, he will not ask you to do that job again. He just checks that you are going to change, that’s it. But next time he still gives you the job again.* (LE11)

One employee valued the trust and responsibility that goes along with autonomy:

*The foreign managers trust you more than the local managers … like they assign you to do this job, you have to work on it and they will just review, if you don’t do it well, you will just have to do it again.* (LE8)

For these employees, the ability to plan and direct their own work not only afforded them feelings of independence and confidence, it also provided them the opportunity to learn and make mistakes, which they appreciated very much. Whilst a number of the employees indicated their openness to work autonomy, a larger and definitely more vocal group of employees indicated their desire for more support from their managers. These employees expressed the concern that they were not getting enough support from their managers. They felt that they needed more ‘help’, ‘assistance’ and ‘guidance’ in order to do better at work. Typical comments that highlighted their desire for more support included:

*If I have a problem, like he should know what I am doing, my job status, my job progress, he have to know that … I should not always have to report to him.* (LE5)

*When I have a problem, I copy my manager in the email, so he knows what is going on. If there’s a problem, he is supposed to come and talk to us, but he does not say anything. He ignores us.* (LE5)

*My manager is very good at pressuring you, like telling you what you have to do … but about help and support, not so much.* (LE7)
Most employees wanted their managers to be more ‘hands on’. They felt that the managers should have known what was going on with their employees and provided them with help or support when needed. They felt that employees should not be left to their own devices. The general impression coming from interviews with the employees was of a desire for more support. The employees wanted more help from their managers. For some of the employees, their managers were found wanting in this regard.

Nonetheless, depending on their experience they desired different kinds of support. The less experienced employees wanted more support in terms of guidance and instructions. They expressed dissatisfaction with being left all alone at work. They reported feeling ‘lost’ and ‘confused’ and would have appreciated more specific instructions. One young employee described it this way:

She just gives you one instruction only. For example ‘Do this for me. No concern. No question, just do it!’ No detail, no instruction but sometimes you know, you need to have more information. (LE14)

The more experienced employees, however, wanted more support in terms of problem solving. They wanted their managers to work with them to solve problems rather than pinpointing blame for the problems. One employee explained this way:

When it comes to problems and you [the manager] are the one who are supposed to help your staff out … I know sometimes the faults comes from the staff but at first you have to help them solve problems first and then you define like who is at fault. (LE5)

4.4.5 Summary

The interviews highlighted differences in what the participants perceived as problems or concerns. One concern that the foreign managers had was work independence. They felt that the employees should have been more work independent. They remarked that employees should be able to plan and organise their own work, adhere to strict deadlines and complete assigned jobs with little supervision. Work for the managers would have been less onerous if the employees exercised greater independence. Upon closer investigation, however, work independence is also about conviction and persuasion. For the employees, one concern was the need for more support. They felt that their managers should have provided more help so they could complete their assigned jobs well. The support they wanted included clear instructions and guidance.
The interviews also underlined how the different and oftentimes opposing concerns and expectations can often lead to misunderstandings in the workplace. For example the managers’ insistence for work independence, as they believed that, ‘that is supposed to be the way’, would invariably be greeted with employee indignation as they sought more help. On the other hand, the employees’ desire for close support as they believed that ‘that is what the managers do’ would invariably be received with managers’ exasperation as they struggled to cope with multiple work demands. This misunderstanding, if not addressed adequately, would only lead to bigger issues at work in the longer term.

4.5 Category 2: Work communication

Another recurring theme was work communication. Many of the respondents raised work communication as a problem or a concern. Discussions with the managers and employees revealed that they were concerned about communication or lack of communication at work. Nevertheless, they differed on what communication they wanted from the other. The managers’ perspectives are presented first, followed by the employees’.

4.5.1 Managers’s concern for asking questions

One form of work communication that concerned the foreign managers was asking questions. A number of managers spoke of the importance of asking questions, expressing wariness that the employees were not asking enough questions. Typical comments from the managers included:

*The new employees, they are afraid to ask questions. They should break out of that fear and come out and ask questions.* (FM19)

*They [the employees] will not come to you, so you have to go to them and ask 'Do you know what to do? They are just sitting there and not coming to us.* (FM12)

There were a number of types of questions that the managers wanted the employees to ask. Several managers wanted the employees to ask for guidance when they did not know what to do, or were not clear on job instructions. The managers indicated that they were more than willing to help, but reiterated that the employees must ask first. The managers often had no idea if the employees wanted help. Apparently, the employees provided little hints on the matter. One manager remarked in frustration:
If they do not understand they should ask, right? But they don’t do that ... they sit quietly, they listen to what you are saying and you assume wrongly that they have taken it in. (FM10)

A number of managers also wanted the employees to ask them for feedback. Even when the employees were quite sure on what to do, some managers believed that the employees should still check with them to make sure that they were heading in the right direction or using the right approach. These managers felt that the employees needed to make sure that their work was aligned with their expectations. The important thing for the employees was to not assume they knew what the managers wanted. One manager lamented:

One major issue with my employees is when they are not sure they don't ask or clarify. What is worse, they will go and do something totally different from what I want. (FM18)

A couple of managers wanted employees to ask ‘why’ more. That is, they wanted the employees to be more ‘critical’ of work matters and not just go along with what the managers said. From the managers’ perspective, the employees did not ask enough about the ‘what and why’ of a task. One manager put it this way:

I always tell my people at meetings ‘please, please I encourage you to question ‘what’s going on’, I don’t want you agree with everything, especially if you don’t think it’s right. (FM14)

The managers put forward a number of explanations for the employees’ apparent hesitance to ask questions. One common rationale was ‘hierarchy’. Ostensibly, the status and power differential between the managers and employees would cause the employee to fear the manager and not ask questions. One manager blamed an education system that made it ‘automatic’ that the employees would not disagree or question the managers. Another manager talked about the employees not wanting to ‘look bad’ and possibly lose their jobs.

Behind the managers’ focus on asking questions, however, was the quality of the work produced. Work quality would inevitably suffer when the employees did not clarify issues. The quality of work would also be unsatisfactory if the employees just went along with what the managers said. Discussion with the managers indicated that they had ‘little time to correct’ the employees’ work. They wanted the employees to produce good work with few
mistakes the first time round. This, they believed, could be achieved to a considerable extent if employees asked more questions.

4.5.2 Managers’ concern for feedback

Another form of work communication that concerned managers was giving feedback. Lussier and Achua (2009) note that any time an employee sends or receives information that relates to work performance they are essentially giving or receiving feedback. A common complaint from managers was that they often had no idea what was going on at work, and would therefore have appreciated more feedback. Their perception was that the employees were not very forthcoming.

There were a number of feedback types that concerned managers. Several managers mentioned feedback on job progress, wanting to know how much progress the employees have made on their jobs. They did not appreciate being kept in the dark and wanted to be kept informed or updated as much as possible on work progress. Typical comments included:

They [the employees] need to talk more to the managers. There has got to be more communication. We need to know what’s happening in the job. What are they doing? Where are they? They don’t talk about the things that we like to know enough. (FM3)

I am supposed to look at all the things [employees’ work] from the manager’s point of view. I have to filter the work. That’s what I do now, I manage people, I give them input and insights, I tell them how to improve. Sometimes I see work coming out, and I say what happened, I have not seen it before. (FM8)

A few managers talked about feedback on issues or problems the employees might have had. The managers reiterated that they wanted to be more in the know, especially with regards to issues that may have affected job quality and delivery. Two managers put it this way:

I will give them a check lists of what to do and I would ask ‘how long would it take for you to do this’. They will say, ‘oh you know, a few days’ and then ... it’s like they would not report back to me when it was done, or if they had any problems, you know, I just would not hear from them. (FM1)

We need updates. We need to know where it [the job] is going. If there are any problems, what are the problems? Whatever it is, we need updates. They don’t give us enough updates on things. (FM3)
The managers put forward a number of reasons for employees’ reluctance about giving feedback. One manager believed that employees did not give feedback because of their fears of delivering ‘bad news’ and being blamed for it:

*The Vietnamese staff, I think they are maybe a little bit afraid to bring bad news. So you know, sometimes, they would not just tell me what is happening or how they are doing. (FM1)*

Two managers noted that the employees hesitated to give feedback due to their fears of having ‘done something wrong’ or having ‘made a mistake’ and being chided and reprimanded for it. One of the managers described it this way:

*What I found here is that people are uncommunicative ... especially if they feel like they have done something wrong or they think that they have made a mistake. (FM2)*

Whatever the reason, the concerned managers expressed consternation when the employees did not provide them sufficient feedback or, just as bad, provided them with late feedback. The managers’ desire for feedback was due to the need to maintain job quality and ensure job delivery. For example, when the employees’ feedback on job issues or problems was conveyed to the managers early, the managers could work on the problems and prevent delays. Failure to do so often resulted in missed deadlines or worse, disgruntled customers. Feedback concerns were especially pressing with newer managers. The less experienced managers were often puzzled about why they were getting so little feedback from their employees. The more experienced managers, however, found other ways to obtain feedback. They implemented systems and processes to obtain the required feedback.

4.5.3 Managers’ concern for sharing information

One other form of work communication that troubled the managers was information sharing. At work, the employees would invariably be organised into teams. Working in teams, however, requires members to share information, which is essential for team members to coordinate work activities and share resources (Hargie & Dickson 2004).

Discussions with the managers revealed the significance they placed on this sharing of information. They expressed a desire for their employees to not only share information with their supervisors, but also with their team members and their colleagues in the broader
organisation. A number of the managers felt that the employees did not do enough of this. Typical comments included:

> Getting them to talk with each other on issues, getting them to work together on problems can be a real challenge. (FM10)

> Before you do something, you are supposed to consult with your team members. This is necessary for a team right? You are supposed to work with the team, making sure, everyone going in the same direction. They don't really do that. (FM8)

Several managers complained about their employees working in ‘silos’. That is, their employees would only focus on their assigned jobs with little regard for what the others were doing, adversely affecting work quality. One manager even compared the situation to that of the notorious traffic in HCMC. This manager remarked that the employees like the many motorcyclists in the city, ‘tend to only look at what's ahead of them but not at who is beside them’. (FM8)

The managers claimed that work activities would be much more effective if the employees interacted and communicated with their team members more. One manager commented that when the employees shared information, the possibility that their work efforts be ‘duplicated’ and ‘resources wasted’ would be reduced. Another manager said that, to facilitate overall work performance and morale, it was most important for the employee to ‘think about others’ and ‘help others out’. The sharing of pertinent information would help in that respect. The idea was that the information that the employees had often impacted others in their jobs. What information they did or did not share share could affect how their peers and coworkers in the organisation performed in their jobs, hence the need for more open sharing of information.

### 4.5.4 Employees’ concern for listening to difficulties

The employees had a very different set of concerns. One work communication that was especially vexing to the employees was what they view as managers’ failure to listen to problems or difficulties. Listening has been described as the process of ‘sensing, interpreting, evaluating, storing and responding to oral messages’ (Steil 1991, p. 203). A number of the employees were of the opinion that their managers did not listen enough to the problems or difficulties they faced a work.
Discussions with the employees indicated that they often struggled with the many demands placed on them at work. A few of the employees described feeling ‘lost’ and ‘anxious’ at not knowing what to do or how to do the assigned work. A couple of the employees referred to the ‘constant pressure’ of meeting deadlines and keeping their managers off their backs. One employee griped about the difficulties of having to ‘report to several managers at once’ with each of the managers insisting that they do their work first. This often left them confused when it came to prioritising work tasks.

The general impression coming from the interviews was that the employees felt that the managers should support the employees more by listening to the problems they faced at work. Typical comments included:

_The managers should always be open minded and listen to what problems they have. Just let Vietnamese employee talk first ... then they will say ‘oh I have this problem or I have that problem’. (LE18)_

_When the foreign manager assigns a difficult task to a Vietnamese staff, he should make sure the staff understands all requirements of the task ... the managers should also care enough to listen carefully what problems they have. (LE17)_

A number of the employees were disappointed with their managers in this respect. They complained that their managers often appeared oblivious, or worse, indifferent to their problems at work. One employee noted that her manager ‘only gives directions’ without trying to listen to the difficulties she faced. Another employee observed his manager ‘talks all the time’ giving him little opportunity to ask questions or to discuss issues. One other employee revealed with some apprehension that her manager seemed to want to avoid discussing work issues altogether. Apparently her manager would ‘run away’ after giving her the necessary instructions. One employee talked about her manager only focusing on ‘short term goals and objectives’ with little regard for the problems or difficulties they faced.

In the main, the employees attributed their managers’ inability or reluctance to listen, to their busy work schedules. That is, they believed the managers were just too busy to get involved with the employees’ concerns. One employee put it this way:

_The managers need to be patient with the Vietnamese staff. It is a real challenge for them because they are very, very busy. They don’t want to spend too much time for staff. (LE12)_
Busy or not, discussions with the employees indicated the importance of listening. From their perspectives they had very pertinent concerns that needed attention. The importance of listening was given more impetus by the employees’ apparent reluctance to ask questions or voice concerns. One employee explained it this way:

_They [the employees] sometimes just don’t understand what their boss wants them to do. And they are afraid to ask questions._ (LE14)

This fear placed more responsibility on the managers to listen to the employees. Further, good listening involves not only hearing what is said but also observing body language and asking questions. One rather senior employee explained it this way:

_You know you can’t encounter a problem and you keep a straight face right? Like you are a team, you go to field work, you go to client office together. And if you see them, they have the wrinkle here, and they do it like this and you know they sigh, you should always ask them what’s their problem._ (LE6)

### 4.5.5 Employees’ concern for listening to opinions

Another form of work communication often mentioned was listening to opinions. Several of the employees felt that their managers did not listen sufficiently to their ideas and opinions. The managers’ apparent inability or unwillingness to listen to opinions was cited as a constant source of disaffection. One employee complained that her manager would often disregard her ideas and opinions. To her consternation, the manager would always insist on his own way of dealing with issues or problems at work:

_Sometimes when we have an issue, I like to do things my way. The problem is she [the manager] always wants me to do it her way, and I will because she is my boss but ..._ (LE5)

A couple of employees complained that when they voiced ideas and opinions which contradicted those of their managers, their managers would get all worked up and cause a scene:

_What we dislike the most is when we talk to her, when we give our opinions if that is not what she wants to hear she gets angry._ (LE9)
Other employees observed that their attempts to contribute ideas and opinions would often be brushed off by their managers as inconsequential or irrelevant. One employee added that her manager would appear to listen to her ideas but would not take them seriously enough to follow them:

_Sometimes I tell my manager something ... I feel that he does not take it seriously. His action is still the same. Nothing different._ (LE15)

Discussions with the affected employees indicate that listening to opinions is most important. The employees felt that they had good ideas and wanted to contribute more at work if given the opportunity. Several of them referred to work procedures and practices that could be better adapted to the situation in Vietnam. Other employees spoke of business strategies that could be better tailored to the needs and demands of the domestic market. However, their perception was that their ideas and opinions often fell on deaf ears.

The same employees described a number of benefits of sincere listening. One employee noted that listening would facilitate their ‘buy in’. That is, they would be better persuaded to follow their managers if they were listened to:

_I like my managers he [the manager] tries to influence us before he asks for anything to be done. Like, why we do this, why we do that, what are the benefits ... then he always, 100% always listen to our feedback._ (LE19)

A couple of employees said that when the managers listened to their ideas they would feel valued and appreciated:

_Maybe my opinion is not the right one or not the best one, but my opinion is considered. Then you know I will feel better. That’s just the way it is._ (LE6).

_The managers should always listen to the employees. The Vietnamese will always have their own ideas on things. When the managers do that the employees would feel happier._ (LE5)

Another employee pointed out that listening to employees’ ideas would help build their self-confidence which would in turn spur them on to contribute more to the company:
Even good Vietnamese staff, if they lack confidence they cannot do anything. And confidence is very helpful to them. Let them feel free to say anything they like, and keep the door open all the times. (LE12)

Another employee said that listening to employee opinions was important because it encouraged engagement and commitment. Like close relationships, listening to employees’ ideas and opinions appeared to boost employee contribution and involvement:

*The Vietnamese people they like to have their own opinion. And if they can have their opinion, they want to do more. You know, ‘this is my opinion and okay I will try my best to see what it is and to try to solve the problem.* (LE6)

In short, the general sentiment coming from the employees was that their ideas and opinions should be heard. The employees felt that managers should not only focus on telling them what to do but should also listen to what they had to say. The positives coming from listening included employee ‘*buy in*, increased job satisfaction and commitment. These benefits far outweigh any possible negatives such as the loss of efficiency and productivity.

**4.5.6 Employees’ concern for listening to what is said**

A number of the employees expressed the concern that the managers did not listen to what they were really saying. These employees contended that it was most important for the managers to do so. One employee explained the importance of listening to what was really said this way:

*The managers must get to know exactly what the Vietnamese employees are saying. Because what Vietnamese employees say (sometimes) may not necessary be what they mean.* (LE1)

The employees put forward a number of reasons for this contradiction. A few mentioned language structure. Because of how the Vietnamese language is organised, the words and sentences used by the employees can often be misconstrued or misinterpreted by their managers. One employee provided an example:

*Yes and no answer in Vietnamese is very different. Example when, I say ‘You don’t like this pet?’ The foreigner will say ‘no’. It means ‘I don’t like this pet.’ But for the Vietnamese, if I say ‘you don’t like this pet?’ They will answer ‘Yes’. ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes, you’re right! I don’t like this pet.’ You got that?* (LE12)
The foreign managers, apparently, would often stumble on the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ question. The managers, especially the new ones, would invariably hear the employees’ ‘no’s’ as ‘yesses’ and their ‘yesses’ as ‘no’s’. The reason for this was the different ways in which ‘yes’ and ‘no’ words are used in the Vietnamese and English languages.

A couple of employees talked about language fluency. Ostensibly, the Vietnamese employees do not think in English. In daily conversations, messages received in English would invariably be translated into Vietnamese. Replies in Vietnamese would in turn be translated back into English before being sent to the managers. This literal translation frequently resulted in the employees blurting out what they really did not mean to say. One employee explained it this way:

> You know we all speak in English, supposed to be English, required to be English. But when we speak, I mean the Vietnamese ... the problem is, we do not think in English. So when we speak out, people understand and follow the words we say but the words we say may not be what we mean. (LE2)

Other employees spoke of their indirectness. That is, they were inclined to be discreet and indirect, especially in the presence of older, more authoritative figures. The employees’ proclivity for indirectness in turn required the managers to place more attention on listening. One employee put it this way:

> You know the Vietnamese people ... they don’t go straight to the point but they go around and around. So the foreign manager will come and ask 'okay, what’s the point? What are you trying to say?' (LE1)

The different language structures, the literal translation and the employees’ inclination for indirect communication all required the managers to pay more attention to listening to what the employees were really saying.

### 4.5.7 Summary

The interviews revealed clear differences in concerns and expectations of managers and employees with regards to work communication. They had very different ideas on what they wanted from the other in terms of communication. The managers were concerned with the lack of communication from their employees, particularly in regards to asking questions and giving feedback. Several managers wanted the employees to ask if they needed help or seek
clarification if they were unsure of job instructions. Other managers wanted the employees to volunteer feedback on job progress and job issues. The managers felt they were better able to keep tabs on what was going on with more communication.

Likewise, the employees were concerned with the lack of communication from the managers. In particular, they were concerned about attending to concerns and listening to opinions. Some employees indicated that they faced many issues at work and wanted the managers to attend to them. Others felt that they had good ideas and wanted the managers to consider them. From the employees’ perspective, listening was most important if the managers wanted to know what was going on.

The interviews also underlined how different expectations could often conflict with one another, resulting in misunderstandings. For instance the managers’ insistence that the employees keep them informed about what was going at work would invariably be greeted by the employees with ‘if the managers want to know what is going on, they should listen.’ On the other hand, the employees’ complaints that the managers did not attend to what was going on at work would invariably be received by the managers with ‘how do I know what is going on, if you don't inform me?’

4.6 Category 3: Communication orientation

Another theme that surfaced regularly was communication orientation. Many respondents, managers and employees, referred to communication orientation as a problem or a concern. Both managers and employees had very different ideas, not only on what should be communicated, but also how it should be communicated. The managers’ views are presented first, followed by the employees.

4.6.1 Managers’ concern for proactive communication

One concern of the managers with regards to communication orientation was proactivity. According to Covey (2004), proactivity refers to taking the initiative to get things done or to achieve a goal. The fundamental idea is to make things happen rather than wait for things to happen. A number of the managers indicated that they wanted the employees to be more proactive when it comes to communication. They wanted the employees to ‘think ahead’, ‘anticipate’, ‘take charge’ and ‘take action’ when communicating at work. The perception was that the employees were not proactive enough. One manager said:
There is still a lack of proactiveness. What we are still trying to work on with our staff is proactiveness. So we focus on training. Immediately from the day that they come in, the first day up until they become managers, I tell them to be proactive. Don't wait, think, think ahead. (FM3)

The managers sought employee proactivity in a number areas. One of these areas was asking questions. The general view was that if the employees did not understand what they had to do, they should ask the managers. Most importantly, the employees should not wait to be queried. One manager expressed reservations at her employees’ inability to do that:

Sometimes you feel that they are not asking anything. You are more scared at that time. Because you don’t how much he knows. I think that they need to be more proactive, if they don’t know or don’t understand they should ask. (FM12)

A few managers also spoke of the employees taking time to plan what questions to ask before approaching them. The idea was, instead of bombarding the manager with all kinds of questions, the employees should ask ‘specific questions’ that reflect ‘prior thinking.’ That is, the employees should not just ask questions, they should also be proactive in coming up with the solutions. The focus then is on checking on the suitability of the solutions. One manager described it this way:

They should not just pose the question and let people answer them. They should also come up with an answer and then let other people feedback on that. (FM18)

The managers also wanted the employees to be more proactive with feedback, especially progress feedback. The managers noted that they preferred the employees to approach them with feedback rather than having to chase the employees for feedback. One manager explained it this way:

We prefer not to chase them but for them to proactively come to us and say, ‘Hey just let you know, everything is going smoothly. That’s fine’ or ‘I’m having a problem but no big deal. I can resolve it but just letting you know, we’re running a little bit behind. (FM10)

Underpinning the managers’ concern for proactivity was work efficiency and productivity. A couple of managers contended that work would be much more effective and efficient if their employees were more proactive. Valuable time and resources would not be wasted ‘idling’ or
‘waiting’ for job instruction and directions. A number of the managers associated proactivity with ‘taking responsibility’ and ‘taking ownership’. For example, employees who proactively clarified task requirements to ensure that jobs were completed on time would be described as ‘taking ownership’. Likewise, employees who proactively updated the managers on job progress instead of waiting to be asked were seen as ‘taking responsibility’. By the same token, employees who neglected to act proactively were viewed as ‘unreliable’ or even ‘lazy’.

4.6.2 Employees’ concern for respect

The employees, however, had a very different set of concerns with regards to communication orientation. One pressing concern that the employees had was respect. In the course of the interviews the word respect was regularly used by the employees. Respect is generally equated with honour, reputation and regard (Samovar et al. 2009). Wood (1999) in turn noted that showing respect is not only appropriate but also morally the right thing to do.

Several of the employees spoke of respect or rather a lack of respect. The employees expressed dismay and reservation at the managers’ perceived inability to afford them respect. Discussions with the employees revealed a number of ways in which the managers did not show them respect. A couple of the employees pointed out that the managers’ did not show respect when they continually questioned their abilities. They described it this way:

They need to respect the Vietnamese staff because sometimes they just think that the Vietnamese staff cannot work the jobs at the same level. (LE4)

They ask you to do something, they give you some duty but they do not feel confident in your ability. They do not think that you can do it well, they do not think that you can complete it 100%. (LE17)

One employee felt that the managers did not show respect when they held a ‘superior than thou attitude,’ and only expected the employees to follow instructions. This employee was highly critical of what was perceived as the managers’ inclination for directing or telling them what to do:

There is a problem with some of the foreigner managers. Their attitude towards Vietnamese staff. That they are staff, that they don’t have your experience and your Western education. You are the expert, so they should do what you tell them to do, but I don’t agree with that. (LE4)
Another employee contended that the managers did not show respect when they failed to pay attention to or listen to their employees’ opinions and suggestions. The employee said:

Some managers think they know everything about how to do things. They do not give the Vietnamese peoples' opinions respect because they have local business understanding ... they don’t value the Vietnamese people’s opinions. (LE13)

A couple of the employees asserted that the managers did not show respect when they used a ‘strong voice’ rather than a ‘soft voice’ when communicating. From the employees’ perspective, when the managers scowled and yelled at their employees, it not only displayed disrespect but it also undermined the employees’ feelings of self-respect and self-worth which could make for an untenable work situation. This was expressed as follows:

Generally in Vietnam it is not acceptable when you yell, even when they do something wrong. I saw many people left, because they don't accept the way she (manager) works, yelling at them and people have self-respect you know and if you yell at people. (LE5)

I don’t accept that. For me, I don’t accept that kind of scolding and saying bad things to people. Even though your position is higher, I don’t care. Sure I will have respect to your position, but it doesn’t mean that you can say anything to me. I don’t accept that.
We have to have respect too. (LE18)

In essence, respect for the employees means not being treated like a child or an inept subordinate. The employees would naturally appreciate any help and support coming from their managers. At the same time they were wary of managers who questioned their abilities, expected them to only follow instructions, ignored their suggestions and reprimanded them harshly for mistakes they made.

Respect is important not least because of its links to communication. For the employees, the greater the respect shown the greater their propensity to communicate. Unfortunately the reverse was also true when the employees felt that they were not accorded the respect they believed they deserved. The following comments typify the employees’ sentiments:

You know sometimes the Vietnamese employees don’t talk because of the managers.
When the managers think that the Vietnamese are at a low level. (LE4)
When scolded, many people here will keep quiet. And just have the bad feeling inside them. They won't express any kind of emotion or feeling. (LE12)

More ominously for the managers, a couple of employees warned that respect is reciprocal. That is, when the managers accorded a measure of respect to the employees they could expect the same from their employees. The reverse was also true when the managers mistreated their employees. These managers apparently would receive what one employee described as ‘bad behaviour.’ One employee explained it this way:

If you respect them [the employees], they will respect to you. I think everyone has to do this, if they don’t do this they will receive bad behaviour. (LE4)

4.6.3 Employees’ concern for understanding

The other concern that the employees had was understanding, or the lack of it. Like respect, the word understanding was frequently used in the interviews by the employees. Understanding is generally equated with empathy (Adler & Rodman 2006). It involves taking on the perspective of others and not making snap judgements. Several employees expressed dismay that their managers’ ‘did not understand them’.

In direct contrast, they pointed to the imperative of understanding them. One employee described it this way:

Also one more thing, when they come to Vietnam to work, they should learn a little bit about the Vietnamese people, about the culture. Actually, mainly the culture. Different cultures will have different ways of solving problems, different ways of communicating. And understanding the Vietnamese culture, the Vietnamese people is also very important. (LE19)

The employees’ calls for understanding focused on Vietnamese business culture and communication practices. A few of the employees spoke of understanding the Vietnamese way of doing business. The perception was that business in Vietnam was conducted very differently from other countries, and that this should be taken into consideration. What exasperated the employees was the managers’ apparent indifference to them. One employee explained it this way:
She really does not understand our culture. She keeps talking about her country. She always say, in my country we do this or we do that. But I say that is your country and this is Vietnam ... you cannot do the same thing. (LE9)

More specifically, the managers’ inability to comprehend how red tape and bureaucracy could affect businesses in Vietnam was often cited by the employees as a source of anxiety. For example, employees would often be asked to perform a task without due regard to the many rules and regulations in place. These rules, if not addressed, would invariably delay the completion of tasks. What irked the employees most was they would often be evaluated negatively when they failed to complete the tasks on time. One employee reported:

The foreign managers, sometimes they feel they can do what they want. But in Vietnam there are so many rules, regulations and hidden laws that they have to follow to do business here. (LE13)

The employees also talked about understanding Vietnamese work communication practices. One work practice that they gravitated to was asking questions. Several of the employees observed that their managers often expected them to ask questions if they didn't know how to do a task or if they were unclear about it. They countered that it was not what they were used to or familiar with. One employee explained it this way:

The foreign managers expect us to ask questions and they will explain everything ... but the thing is with Vietnamese people they don’t get used to asking questions. (LE8)

Another work communication practice that the employees referred to was speaking up. They noted that they were often expected to speak up on issues or concerns at work. Again, this was not what they were used to. For them, communication was often constrained by a need to show respect. Respect, in terms of using a soft, polite voice must be used with more senior, more authoritative figures. The following comment illustrated this constraint:

You cannot be outspoken, especially with someone older or higher level than you, for that is impolite. If you don’t agree you have to speak out very gently, soft way or different way, not straightforward way, not directly with your boss. (LE18)

The employees’ focus on respect and understanding came from their rich cultural heritage. Speaking directly, disagreeing with or challenging authoritative figures including parents was not an option they could take on easily. One employee put it this way:
I see in the American movies, when the children don’t agree with their parents, they speak out. When they don’t agree, they will say ‘I don’t like this, or I don’t want to do that’ … but in Vietnam, you can disagree with your parents but you still have to obey them. You have to respect them. That is very clear in our culture. (LE17)

Interviews with the employees indicated that whilst they recognised that their inability or disinclination to speak up or to ask questions could cause confusion, they also felt that the managers should ‘better understand’ them. For the employees, better understanding included the managers not making the simplistic assumptions that the employees had no queries when they didn’t ask questions or that they had no issues when they didn’t speak up. Better understanding on the managers’ part, according to the employees, also included the managers asking them questions and carefully listening to them.

4.6.4 Summary

The interviews highlighted differences between managers and employees in concerns and expectations about communication orientation. One concern that the managers had was proactivity. Specifically the managers wanted the employees to be more proactive in asking questions and giving feedback.

The general idea was that employees should not wait but should take necessary action to ensure tasks were completed on time and work goals were achieved. As such employees who demonstrated proactive communication were perceived more favourably. One manager even singled out proactivity as the primary factor for employee advancement and promotion:

Because of the selection process, everyone comes in very capable. So you’re here because you could do the job, but if you want to progress further and faster, it’s all up to you. What sets you apart is your own initiative and your being proactive. (FM3)

One concern of the employees was understanding or empathy. They desired more understanding in business and communication practices. The fundamental idea that emerged from the interviews was that things worked differently in Vietnam and that this needed to be taken into consideration. On the other hand, when the managers insisted on their way of doing things, it not only indicated ethnocentrism but more importantly it might not work as well. One employee put it this way:
The foreign managers ... many of them have their own way of doing business, it is hard for them to adapt immediately. But if they want to continue doing business in Vietnam they have to be flexible. They have to follow the rules here ... they have to sing the song that other Vietnamese sings. (LE13)

The interviews also showed that the different concerns and expectations for communication orientation often conflict with each other, leading to miscommunication and misunderstanding at work. For example, the managers’ insistence that ‘the employees be more proactive’ to ensure that they complete their job on time would invariably be greeted with the employees’ exasperation, that the managers ‘do not understand the difficulties’ of the job. And the employees’ entreaties for more ‘understanding’ of poor job performance would invariably be met with the managers’ demand that the employees be more ‘proactive’ and ‘take more responsibility’ for their jobs.

4.7 Category 4: Language

Another theme that regularly came up from the interviews was language. Both foreign managers and local employees frequently referred to language as a problem or a concern when communicating at work. According to Adler and Rodman (2006) language is simply the collection of codes or words that is used by a group of people to convey a message. McShane and von Glinow (2008) added that in order for communication to be effective there must be a ‘common codebook.’ The managers’ perspectives on language are presented first, followed by the employees’.

4.7.1 Managers’ concern about vocabulary

One aspect of language that the managers were concerned with was vocabulary or rather the lack of vocabulary of employees. Several of the managers remarked that they were concerned with their employees’ lack of familiarity with the words used at work including jargon. They described the situation this way:

In conversations the Vietnamese employees find it difficult to catch up, they could understand us generally but they would easily get lost because there were so many words they were not familiar with. (FM1)
The staff that we had speaks English but they did not have the range of vocabulary. When running a corporation, we use a special language. And they are often not translatable. (FM6)

Jargon words are simply technical words used by groups of people in a specific profession or in a specific industry (Adler & Rodman 2006; Wagner & Hollenbeck 2009). They are mainly used to facilitate communication. The managers expected the employees to be more familiar with the jargon used at work. Nevertheless, they found that they often had to stop and explain to the employees the meaning of the words used during meetings and discussions. As such, some of the managers sought to avoid the use of jargon altogether. Other managers, however, indicated that they always made it a point to check with the employees if they understood the words being used.

4.7.2 Managers’ concern about depth of understanding

The other aspect of language that concerned the managers was depth of understanding. A number of the managers expressed concerns over the employees’ lack of understanding of the words used at work. The managers were of the opinion that the employees knew the words but they did not fully understand the ideas or concepts behind them, or at least, did not understand them in the same way the managers did. The managers talked about their employees having ‘weak’ and ‘superficial’ understanding of the words and terms used.

The managers in the main attributed the employees’ surface understanding to their weak grasp of the English language. One manager, however, contended that the employees’ superficial understanding was due to the nascent economic development in the country. Another manager thought that the surface understanding was due to the employees’ ‘inexperience’ or lack of ‘exposure’. The general feeling was the employees understood the words, and what they meant in the dictionary, but they did not understand the words deeply enough because they had not seen them applied in real life.

More importantly, the employees’ perceived vocabulary and depth of understanding deficit presented the managers with numerous challenges. Chief among them was understanding job instructions. Several of the managers remarked that due to the employees’ tenuous mastery of the language, they had difficulty getting them to understand job instructions. Two managers described it this way:
I think the instructions do not sink in very quickly. It takes a lot of repeated effort, giving them the same instructions, coaching them again and again before finally getting it right ... you cannot give them a handout and tell them to go and do it. You have to sit down with them and explain. (FM10)

*Probably the most difficult thing that I had at the start was communicating about things that needed to get done and how they needed to get done and when they needed to get it done.* (FM1)

Other managers felt that the employees’ weak grasp of the language affected their ability to perform analytical work. Apparently the analysis of problems or situations by the local employees lacked the necessary depth or insight. This presented the affected managers with a problem, as a significant portion of the employees’ jobs was to produce analytical reports:

*In our line of work, the employees have to analyse the jobs they are doing. I often find their analysis weak. Maybe it’s because of their language ... I am not sure.* (FM10)

*When presented with a situation or problem, I find my employees struggle to identify the relevant issues or the ways to mitigate the issues.* (FM18)

Behind the managers’ concerns was the quality of the work produced. The fear was that if the employees were not able to understand the job instructions clearly they would invariably produce poor quality work.

Also, if they were not able to evaluate and analyse the situation presented to them because of language or other reasons they would inevitably produce substandard reports. One manager put it this way:

*If the person does not speak well, and cannot communicate clearly ... then there is this thing about trust ... trust about their competence and their ability to do the job well.*

(FM9)

A few managers found the situation rather exasperating. They found that they often had to sit down and explain ideas, concepts and job instructions very slowly to their employees. The feeling was this should not have been what they were doing as it distracted them from their other work commitments. Several of the managers contended that the employees needed to work on their English language skills quickly. Other managers, however, were more
accommodating. They indicated greater willingness to help the employees out but they still found the task onerous.

4.7.3 Employees’ concern about accents and rates of speech

Like the managers, the employees similarly perceived language as a problem. One employee put it this way: ‘I think the first thing with me was the language ... because it was not my native language.’ (LE13). The employees however were concerned with different aspects of language. One aspect of language that was especially vexing to the employees was accent.

According to Samovar et al. (2009) strange accents are simply variations in pronunciation that occur among people speaking the same language. Different nationalities and different cultures naturally speak the English language differently. Accents appeared uppermost in the minds of the Vietnamese employees. Many employees referred to strange accents as a concern. These employees indicated that they had difficulty dealing with the different forms of English spoken at work.

Whilst they had no issues with the American or Australian forms of English, they expressed apprehension over the Asian variation of English. Typical comments included:

*I had different foreign managers, US, UK, Singapore, Philippines ... so they all have different accents. At the beginning the greatest challenge was the language barrier. I could not catch all the accents. (LE13)*

*A lot of the managers here come from Asian countries like Singapore or India. And they often talk with an accent that we just cannot understand. (LE11)*

For these employees, alien accents provided them considerable anxiety, as they were often unsure of exactly what was said or what the managers wanted them to do. Aggravating the problem further was the managers’ inclination to speak fast. One employee put it this way:

*First is the accent. Like I can understand the Australian or the American accent, but the Indian accent I find that difficult to catch. Second is the speed ... they speak too fast. I cannot understand everything they want me to do. (LE15)*

Another employee added:
The managers, they often talk too fast and their expression is also not clear. Maybe it is because they don’t arrange things to say before they talk. You know, it just cause confusion to staff. (LE12)

For some of the employees, their managers simply talked too fast. They had difficulty trying to follow what the managers were saying. One explanation, as one employee described it, was ‘the Vietnamese people, they do not think in English.’ (LE3) That is, they tend to translate whole messages from English to Vietnamese and then back again to English during conversations. This would invariably affect how quickly the local employees could decipher and understand the messages exchanged.

Another reason put forward was their listening skills. A couple of the employees remarked that their listening skills were often not up to expectations as they lacked practice. Apparently the focus in schools and in institutions of higher learning was on grammar and sentence structure rather than conversational skills. Further, in the office there was little opportunity for them to practice English, save with the managers. Like accent, fast talk caused the employees considerable anxiety as they were often unsure of what the managers wanted them to do.

4.7.4 Employees’ concern about jargon

Another aspect of language that troubled the employees was jargon. Several employees noted that they were often confused by the variety of terms, technical or otherwise, used at work. They were rather unfamiliar with many of the words the managers took for granted. Typical comments included:

I think I did not know enough words ... also I studied English in Hue so I did not have much practise listening and speaking to foreigners. It was hard for me to listen and understand whole sentences at the beginning. (LE13)

I think the most challenging problem is, we sometimes don’t understand the managers, their feedback, comments, discussion. This is mainly because of our English. We do not know enough words. (LE12)

A couple of the employees explained that business and management courses in the local universities were mostly taught in the Vietnamese language. As a result they were often caught unaware of the terms or jargons used at work. Whatever jargon they knew they picked
up at work. The idea was they would improve if they were given the opportunity to work on their English and they were able to gain more work experience and exposure.

Like the managers, behind the employees’ concerns was the desire to do good work. Discussions with the employee revealed that they all wanted to do well in their jobs. They wanted to put in good work performances so they could progress in their jobs. However they mentioned that the managers’ strange accents, fast pace of talk and use of jargon made it all difficult for them. These concerns were most acute with new graduates. More experienced employees, on the other hand, learned to cope. They learned to familiarise themselves with the way the managers spoke. Or they learned to stop the managers and ask questions.

The general sentiment coming from the interviews with the employees was that the managers could help by focusing on clarity. For the employees clarity could be improved by speaking clearly, slowly and using simpler words. Clarity would also be enhanced by checking with the employees to see if they understood. Finally, clarity can be increased by combining oral and written forms of communication. One employee described it this way:

> For important information, we should always have something in writing. We should have them written down. If it’s not so important, it can be oral, but we need confirmation. (LE12)

### 4.7.5 Summary

The interviews highlighted the different concerns and expectations of managers and employees with language. The managers appeared more concerned with language proficiency, including vocabulary and depth of understanding. The belief was that a good command of the language would enable both manager and employee to share a common ‘codebook’ which would facilitate communication and good work. The concern for language was especially pronounced for managers whose responsibility it was to churn out analytical reports. Whilst most of the managers were rather accommodating, a few of the managers stressed that the local employees could also be more proactive in improving their English language skills.

In direct contrast, the employees appeared more concerned with language clarity, including pronunciation, pace of talk and jargon. The employees desired clearer, more organised communication from their managers. The idea was they would only be able to produce good work if they were clear on what their managers wanted. This concern for clarity was especially pressing for new employees who had just started work. Calls for clarity were the
loudest from newer employees. The managers could help with clarity by speaking slowly, asking questions and complementing verbal with written instructions.

The interviews also underlined how different concerns and expectations at work could often lead to misunderstandings. For example the managers’ beliefs that the employees should understand the jobs instructions meted out, as their ‘language skills should be good enough’ would invariably be greeted by the employees with ‘the managers should be clear and organised’ if they wanted their employees to understand the job instructions.

4.8 Category 5: Coping responses or strategies

In response to what they perceived as problems or concerns, the managers and employees came up with a number of coping strategies. Whilst the managers referred to closer supervision and reducing distance, the employees talked about keeping their distance and adapting to what the foreign managers wanted.

4.8.1 Managers responding by increasing supervision and direction

Faced with employees who hesitated to communicate, the foreign managers came up with a number of responses. Several spoke of higher levels of supervision including checking in on their employees more regularly. Rather than waiting for the employees to come forward with questions or feedback, the affected managers followed up on their employees more frequently. Typical comments included:

To make sure they understand, I tend to repeat what I say ... or ask, ‘do you understand? Do you really understand?’ Further, I keep a check on them regularly and follow up. (FM5)

The thing is when they don’t understand they don’t ask you. And when the project moves along they still don’t come back to you ... so that is why you need to closely monitor and supervise. You cannot be hands off. Instead of checking on them once a week, you need to check on them every two days. (FM10)

Because of their busy schedules, the managers preferred employees to come forward with questions and feedback. But the employees’ apparent disinclination to communicate left the managers with few alternatives but to go around chasing their employees for feedback. Close supervision also included instituting policies and procedures to facilitate employee queries
and feedback. Several of the managers required their employees to report back their work progress on a weekly, even daily basis:

*We run on this very short iteration where, on a daily basis they have a set tasks that they are assigned to and by the end of that day, they are expected to finish those tasks. So, it’s daily iterative cycle and if they don’t finish the tasks in that day, they have to report back and say why they didn’t finish or if they had problems.* (FM1)

*Sometimes you need to be really careful. Because once the time is over if they don’t fix it, then it would lead to a big problem. So you need to watch what they are doing constantly. Normally, what I would do is, in the evening I will review their documentation and if anything I would tell them the next day ... fix it now.* (FM12)

In sum, the managers kept a close watch on their employees. The managers wanted to know what was going on with their employees and the jobs they had been tasked with. The employees’ perceived reticence in communicating, however, persuaded the managers to check in on them more regularly, or to come up with rules to compel the employees to report back to the managers with questions, feedback and other information. One manager said, rather matter of factly, that close supervision would continue until the employees showed that they were in control of their jobs, which invariably included informing and updating their managers on what was going on:

*If you don’t like to be told what to do, you have to show people that you’re in control of what you do then people will stop telling you what to do. But if you cannot show that, then people will keep on telling you what to do.* (FM3)

**4.8.2 Managers responding by reducing distance**

Other managers referred to encouraging communication with the employees by reducing distance and using suitable communication channels. A couple of the managers attempted to reduce distance by speaking Vietnamese. One of the managers explained it this way:

*I try to talk to them more in Vietnamese, like when it comes to work, technical words is still in English but in social conversation I speak to them in Vietnamese. I think they are more willing to come to me now with their ideas and opinions.* (FM3)

A couple of the managers attempted to reduce the distance by establishing rapport and close relations. One manager explained it this way:
Now, one of the things I like to do when managing a new team is I like to break the ice. I like to make them feel very comfortable with me, you know. I have two ways of doing that. The first way is finding something in common that we like. The second is to get to know them well. (FM4)

These managers tried to persuade the employees to communicate by identifying with them and reducing the perceived distance between manager and employee. The idea behind their initiatives made sense, as when employees feel closer to the managers they would be more likely to communicate. In contrast, when the employees feel alienated from their managers, they would invariably close up. Accordingly, the managers reported very encouraging results. One manager explained the situation this way:

You have to make a connection. I find that unless you make that connection, unless they see you immersing in their culture, it will be difficult for them to open up. (FM4)

A small number of the managers also looked at alternative channels of communication to address the employees’ reticence to talk. The managers in question utilised emails, instant messaging and online chats in addition to the more traditional face-to-face communication to encourage talk. One manager described her communication practice this way:

I normally communicate with the employees through the email or through the firm’s internet chat system ... some of the employees come and update me [work progress] verbally. Some do not. Those that do not, I get them to update me through email or through the chatting system. (FM5)

The same managers indicated that it was imperative to give the employees flexibility in how they could communicate with them, saying that:

Some of my staff are quite timid, some of them think their English is not good so they write emails. Those that are not so confident, they tend to email you rather than talk to you. I think they feel more comfortable with emails. (FM5)

Another manager similarly found their employees were better at reading and writing in English than they were at speaking. Consequently, he advocated email in place of face-to-face communication or, in his case, teleconferencing. The manager described it this way:

Now what I’ve also done to adapt is, that because my local staff is better at reading and writing, so I have the clients just send emails. They will write up all their
requirements and email them to my staff directly and copy me. My staff will get the instruction, read it, follow, and implement. They do this on a daily basis. So we actually eliminated all the conference calls. (FM1)

These managers found it critical to be flexible and use the communication channels that worked best for both managers and employees. Instead of forcing their employees to engage in face-to-face talk, the managers allowed their employees to use the communication channels that they felt most comfortable with.

4.8.3 Employees responding by keeping quiet or keeping distance

Faced with managers who hesitated to communicate with them, or listen to their concerns and opinions, the employees came up with a couple of coping strategies including adapting to the situation and keeping quiet or keeping distance. One employee aptly summed up the situation this way:

*When you have a manager who does not listen to you, one way is to adapt, to be flexible. The other way is to keep quiet or stay far away or say bad things about the boss.* (LE12)

A number of employees suggested keeping quiet and following instructions when their managers failed to listen to their ideas and opinions. One of them put it this way:

*Our manager, when we give our real opinions if that is not what she wants to hear she gets angry. At the beginning we told her exactly what we think. Later we found out that is not what we are supposed to do ... so we no longer tell her what we think, we keep quiet, do our job and tell her what she wants to hear.* (LE9)

A few of the employees advocated distancing themselves, when their managers neglect to listen to their concerns. One of the employees explained it this way:

*Let me tell you how my colleagues think. If they don’t get along with their managers, first they will try to stay as far as possible from the managers, then they will say bad things about the managers, then they will change jobs.* (LE12)

Failure of managers to listen to their employees also has had implications for employee involvement. A couple of employees observed that when managers failed to listen to their opinions, they would invariably reciprocate by being less involved and less supportive of their
managers. These employees would apparently just do as they were told, and did not do more to help their managers. This approach, referred to as the ‘passive aggressive strategy,’ is explained this way:

*The Vietnamese people they have strong opinions about things. If they can have their opinions, they will do more. But if the manager insists on his way, okay, I will do what he says, but if anything happens, it’s not my problem, because I just follow him.* (LE6)

In short, a number of the employees, albeit a small number, indicated that when managers refused to listen to them, they would react by keeping quiet, showing little support, and if possible avoiding any interaction with the managers. In essence, the employees focused on detaching or alienating themselves from work. If this response was not addressed, it would ultimately be detrimental to the morale and productivity of the workplace in the long term.

### 4.8.4 Employees responding by adapting

Most of the employees, however, were much more positive. Faced with managers who appeared indifferent to their concerns and ideas, the employees learned to adapt. They focused on changing themselves to better deal with the situation. Typical comments included:

> *With different managers, I have learned different ways to deal with them. I’m very good at, you know, how to deal with the different management styles. Be adaptable and flexible. Because I don’t have the right to dismiss my managers, that’s the truth. Am I right? So we need to learn how to live with them.* (LE4)

> *Sometimes you need to know how to change and make it smooth. You cannot say I don’t agree with the wrong voice or with the high voice or something else like this. So, that’s not good. You need to provide this information about why did you want to do that and what is the benefit you bring to him, to me as well.* (LE12)

For the majority of the employees, the sentiment appeared to be that of making the best of the situation. Instead of wasting time and energy reacting to the manager’s behaviour in a way that would invariably end up badly for both parties, the employees preferred to look at how they could adapt themselves to better meet the managers’ demands. This included finding out what their managers wanted and changing their communication styles so their managers could hear them.
4.8.5 Summary

In response to the employees’ inability or hesitance to proactively communicate with them, the managers came up with two alternatives. One was to adapt their communication approach, such as by reducing distance and using other channels of communication to facilitate talk. The other alternative was to impose closer supervision and direction. Similarly, the employees came up with two alternatives to cope with managers’ inability or reluctance to communicate with them. One was to keep quiet and do their job or to keep their distance from the managers. The other was to adapt to the demands placed on them.

4.9 Results from focus groups

Two focus groups were organised towards the end of the study. One was with a group of veteran foreign managers and the other with a group of experienced local employees who had become managers in their own right. All the participants had from 5 – 15 years of working experience in cross-cultural settings. The focus group participants were not part of the interview samples, although they all met the criteria for participation. The many years of experience of each participant the research provided a rich source of data. This data was used to augment the data collected and to verify the themes generated from the individual interviews.

In the focus groups the participants were asked to focus their discussions on the following questions, ‘What were some concerns, issues or problems that you face communicating when you first started work in HCMC?’ and ‘What do you think should have been done to facilitate communication at work?’ The discussions in the focus groups generated a lot of interest from the participants. Everyone had something to say about the research area under investigation. As such, the researcher had the difficult task of ensuring that each of the participants had an opportunity to speak. He made sure that the quiet participants were able to put in their views without being influenced or interrupted by their more vocal, opinionated colleagues.

Generally, the focus group discussions produced the same categories or themes as the individual interviews. For example, work roles and work independence were referred to in the discussions. Several of the participants similarly noted the new employees’ inclination to wait for instructions. However, one participant argued that the new employees’ leaning towards specific instructions was because ‘they are not aware of it, aware of the need to work
That is, the employees do not work on their own because they were not aware they were supposed to.

Another participant added that work independence was more about skills, or the lack of them, ‘because they don’t know what to do so they wait for instructions. But if they know what to do they would be able to work independently, no problems on that’. With regard to this aspect, the participants pointed to the importance of the manager providing support to the employees including training, particularly with the newer recruits. What was most important was not to make premature assumptions about their ability. There was also the idea that the employees should be informed of their duties and functions. One participant observed that, ‘If the employees know they are allowed to work independently, not just act on the boss’s instructions, then you know they will take initiative’.

Concerning work communication, the participants observed that giving feedback, asking questions, and listening were all pertinent to the effective functioning of the workplace. Several of the participants noted that the local employees could be quite communicative. That is, they could be very good at asking questions and giving feedback when they needed to. Other participants, however, felt that this was not enough. One participant put it this way, ‘I’d rather the employees over-communicate than under-communicate. I’d rather they ask me the same question 10 times and get it right than once and make all kinds of mistakes’.

One participant, however, felt that communication comes with experience, saying, ‘If they are more exposed and they are more experienced, they will learn what questions to ask, when to clarify issues and how to give feedback’. Another participant felt that it was also about confidence, ‘I think it’s a confidence issue, they will be more willing to feedback and share ideas if they are confident ... so we just need to encourage them to be more vocal’.

Nonetheless, the participants pointed out that the managers could help. One participant noted that with the managers, ‘the first thing is the friendly attitude. You must show that you are friendly, open and that you welcome all suggestions. Then the employee will be free and confident to speak up’. Another participant stressed that the local employees ‘will not talk to their managers if they feel that there is no connection.’ Like the individual interviews, the discussions suggested that communication closely followed relationships. Once there were good relations, communication would invariably improve and vice versa. Further, there was the issue of a safe environment. One participant pointed out that, ‘once they [employees]
know it’s a safe environment … they will learn to argue, to state their point, to clarify issues’. In essence there would be more communication if there was no threat of reprimand.

One participant advocated the, ‘open door policy’ to encourage communication. That is, ‘what the boss should do is, they should walk around and talk to the employees and ask “how are you?”’ They must show that they are a nice guy too’. Further, when the managers queried regarding their employees, they should also make sure they listened. Apparently managers just don’t do enough listening. One participant pointed out that ‘communication does not only mean speaking, communication is also about are you a good listener. As a manager are you a good listener? Do you give time to your employees to speak to you? Managers often don’t do that because they don’t have time, they have goals and targets to achieve’.

With respect to communication orientation, the participants observed that the employees’ inclination to take initiative depended very much on what the managers did or did not do. One participant noted that his employees would often become ‘passive’ in the presence of an older more authoritative figure, ‘you know when my staff deal with a more senior executive, they always assume a more passive role … and I have to specifically tell them not to do that’. Another participant pointed out that, ‘the attitude of the boss is important; he should let the employees know if he is open to the employees questioning him or take initiative’. Thus, understanding the employee and taking initiative on the managers’ part to inform and educate them is key to the employees engaging in proactive communication.

With regard to language, one participant said that ‘language was not a real problem in our company. Our recruitment process will already filter out the employees which we do not want’. Other participants however tended to differ. One participant acknowledged, ‘We have staff. They all can speak pretty good English. However some can understand very well what I tell them to do. Others can take a really long time. I think it’s English’. One local participant placed the language issue in a bigger perspective, pointing out that if the employees are new, ‘they will have a language barrier. First language is used differently. Then there is also the terminology. The words used at work are very specialised, whereas we only study general English’. This places more responsibility on the manager to help and guide the employees.

Finally, the participants remarked that language skills can adversely affect communication. One participant noted that when English is not their native language, ‘the employees will not feel confident, and they won’t come out and express themselves’.
Another participant added that with employees who do not use English regularly, there will be greater apprehension over communication, ‘like they have to think about what to say and then how to say it. And then when they say it, they are so afraid they will be misunderstood. So it will cause all kinds of problem’. In the main, the focus group discussions produced the same themes as the interviews. Like the interviews, the focus groups highlighted differences in perspectives on the often controversial subject matter. To ensure good work performance, these different perspectives must be taken into account and managed well.

4.10 Theoretical model of misunderstanding at work

The model for misunderstandings occurring in the workplace depicted in Figure 4.2 was developed by integrating the five categories identified. The core category of ‘misunderstanding’ was able to connect all the categories that emerged. The model describes how the different concerns about work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language, held by the managers and their employees contributed to the frequent occurrences of misunderstanding at work. These concerns, which reflect the different expectations that they had of each other at work comes from their different values and beliefs system. The different values and beliefs in turn came from their different education, kinship, economic and socio-political systems (Stewart & Bennett 1991). The misunderstandings usually led to poor job performances and job dissatisfaction. To deal with these misunderstandings, the participants came up with a number of coping strategies.

The categories were moderated by age, experience and training. Adler and Rodham (2006) and McShane and von Glinow (2010) all talk about age and experience playing an important role in perception. This was evidenced in the interviews. Older and younger employees expressed varying levels of concern with regards to support. Less experienced employees were often distraught at the lack support from their managers, but older and more experienced employees learned to make do or ask for more help from the managers. Similarly, the older and younger managers had different levels of concern about feedback. The newer managers were often exasperated with the lack of feedback from their employees, but the more experienced managers simply implemented systems and processes to obtain the required feedback.
The categories were also closely interrelated. That is, expectations about work roles would directly or indirectly influence expectations for communication including what to communicate (work communication) and how to communicate (communication orientation). With regard to the managers, their beliefs about work independence persuaded them to demand more proactive feedback from the employees. The employees were given the discretion to work on their own, but they still had to report what was going on with their jobs. Similarly the managers’ ideas on work independence required the employees to have adequate language skills in order to be able to work on their own.

With regard to the employees, their beliefs about supportive managers persuaded them to desire more empathetic communication, particularly listening. They reasoned that if the managers wanted the job done well, they should help and support their employees to do so. Listening to their employees’ concerns was seen as a good start. Likewise, the employees’ focus on support required the managers to be more organised and structured when communicating with them.
The categories’ close interrelationships, in turn, can make differences between them almost imperceptible. Both foreign managers and local employees, for example, rarely differentiate between the categories. From the perspective of the managers, engagement and participation often means proactive questioning and vice versa. From the perspective of the employees, close relations often means, respectful listening and vice versa. For most of the participants, there is no clear distinction between the categories. For the purpose of identifying the various causes of misunderstanding, however, the model constructed separates the categories but at the same time demonstrates how they are intricately linked.

This model of misunderstanding generally corresponds to the literature, in particular the theory of roles. Role theory refers to the body of analysis that explores the link between organisations, culture and behaviour. Role theory proposes that employees occupy specific positions in the organisation. With each position there are expectations on behaviours. (Gibson et al. 2011) Roles have been described by different authors as functions, tasks or simply behavioural expectations in the workplace (Biddle 1986). Roles have also been described as values or beliefs about duties and responsibilities related to a position in the organisation (Biddle 1986).

Generally, with each position there are specific expectations on what duties or tasks the employees perform, managers and staffs included, and how they perform them. The primary issue, as vividly illustrated in the interviews, is that each of the two groups of employees can have very different expectations of the other in terms of work roles and tasks (Gibson et al. 2011, Wagner & Hollenbeck 2009), potentially causing misunderstanding and conflict. The differences in role expectations can be further exacerbated by cultural background and training. Expectations about what managers and employees do and how they do it can differ markedly according to cultural beliefs and education.

Hofstede (1986), for example, refers to different cultures having different role perceptions of the teacher-student relationships in schools which would naturally be carried over to the superior and subordinate relationships at work. Samovar and Porter (2003) similarly talk about different cultures having different ideas on roles and accordingly behavioural norms and attitudes for children, parents, teachers, supervisors, employers and others. Gudykunft, Ting-Toomey and Nishida (1996), and Lustig and Koester (2010), in turn, refer to different cultures having different communication values and norms that contribute to miscommunication and misunderstanding if not addressed adequately.
Similarly, language can also contribute to serious misunderstanding at work. Adler and Rodman (2006), Gudykunst (2004), McShane and von Glinow (2010) and Wood (2010) all point to language as a major barrier to communication. Different levels of language proficiency, accents, jargon and rate of speech have all been referred to as common causes for misunderstandings in the workplace.
CHAPTER FIVE - DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the categories and subcategories arising from the data analysis. The purpose of the discussion is to compare the emergent themes concerning foreign managers’ and local employees’ experiences of communication at work against findings in the extant literature, and to explore their implications for theory and practice. Data analysis from the previous chapter showed that managers and employees had very different concerns with regards to work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language. These concerns reflected their expectations of what the other group should do. These different expectations led to frequent misunderstandings at work. To deal with these misunderstandings the managers and employees came up with different coping strategies which more often than not exacerbated the misunderstandings further. The discussions are presented according to the themes generated from the data analysis, as illustrated in Table 5.1. The structure of the chapter is given in Figure 5.1.

5.2 Work roles

A major theme that emerged from the interviews with both managers and employees was work roles. Articulated at length in the literature, work roles generally means the set of duties, functions or tasks related to a position in an organisation (Biddle 1986). Employees in an organisation naturally have different roles to play. Nevertheless, perceptions of exactly what those roles are can differ greatly, creating opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict. The managers’ perspectives on work roles are discussed first followed by those of the employees’.

5.2.1 Work independence and involvement

One concern of managers with regards to work roles was work independence. A number of managers expressed a desire for employees to be able to work on their own. They wanted employees to be able to ‘organise own work’, ‘follow up on issues,’ ‘complete assigned tasks’, and ‘adhere to schedules’. Some managers expressed dismay that they had to constantly provide employees with specific work instructions or remind them of impending deadlines. The general feeling coming from the managers was that this was not what they were supposed to be doing.
Figure 5.1  Structure of Chapter 5

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Work roles

5.3 Work communication

5.4 Communication orientation

5.5 Language

5.6 Coping responses or strategies

Source: Developed for this research study
Table 5.1 Comparing emerging themes and issues with the extant literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes from interviews with the managers</th>
<th>Extent the literature addressed them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work roles</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Work communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving feedback</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communication orientation</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of understanding, vocabulary</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes from interview with the employees</th>
<th>Extent the literature addressed them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work roles</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close relationships and support</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to concerns</td>
<td>To some extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to opinions</td>
<td>To some extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to what is said</td>
<td>To some extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication orientation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>To some extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>To some extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent, fast pace of talk, jargon</td>
<td>Addressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research study
The managers’ concerns for work independence have been discussed in the literature. Erez’s (1997, 2010) study on work behaviours and culture, for example, observed that members of individualist cultures are partial to work independence or job autonomy. Autonomy generally refers to the extent in which a job provides the employees with the discretion to organise, plan and schedule their own work without external interference. Higher job autonomy means the employees get to decide how and when to do the jobs assigned with little direction or supervision.

Job autonomy is consistent with the convictions and persuasion of individualist cultures. Markus and Kitayama (1991) note that members of individualist cultures tend to see themselves as distinct or separate from others. This is likely to persuade them to value self-determination and self-governance. With job autonomy, the idea is the employees should be more self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-directed. That is, they should be able to take control or take charge of their own work. They should also not expect the managers to closely direct or supervise them.

The other concern of managers was employee involvement. Several managers called for greater employee contribution and involvement at work. For the managers, involvement includes ‘voicing opinions’, ‘giving suggestions,’ ‘contributing ideas’ and generally ‘engaging in discussions’. The affected managers felt that the employees should be more forthcoming with their ideas and opinions. The belief is the employees are local so they should have better insights. A couple of managers also described feeling isolated and being left alone at work. As such they wanted more help with contributions of ideas and suggestions. Nonetheless, they felt that the employees were not sufficiently cooperative.

Managers’ concerns about involvement have also been discussed at length in the literature. Employee involvement or what the literature refers to as employee participation (McShane & von Glinow 2008) refer to the idea that the employees be given the opportunity to actively contribute to the organisation. Managers are often tasked with setting goals, crafting strategies and planning work activities to achieve set goals. Employee participation is about getting the employees’ involvement in the aforementioned tasks. Erez (1997, 2010) observes that members of individualist cultures are partial towards work participation. Similarly, Javidan et al. (2004) in the GLOBE leadership study on middle-level executive from 62 countries, find that managers from Anglo countries tend to associate effective leadership with participative leadership.
There are several arguments for employee participation. McShane and von Glinow (2010) for example, note that obtaining employee participation increases the quality of decision-making and problem solving. The belief is that having more heads around a problem, managers and employees included, should provide better quality solutions and consequently better decision-making. Lussier and Achua (2009) add that employee participation is critical to the success of the modern organisation. Getting all the employees involved is needed to provide the organisation with the competitive advantage needed to compete in the marketplace.

Just as important, Erez (1997, 2010) points out that participation appeals to the individualist cultures’ desire for self-actualisation. Markus and Kitayama (1991) note that members of individualist cultures view the self as distinct and separate, which not only persuades them to appreciate self- governance but also to value self-actualisation or the opportunity to realise one’s potential. Through employee participation, employees will not only feel that they have an influence over the jobs given them, but they will also be able to contribute significantly to the organisation and achieve success. This helps the employees to be more willing to work hard.

However, any expectation on the managers’ part for employee autonomy and participation faces a number of obstacles in Vietnam. The literature describes several challenges to employee autonomy and participation in collectivist cultures. Top of the list is the idea that employees in collectivist cultures, such as Vietnamese culture, have different interests and needs. Triandis (1995) notes that people in individualist cultures generally focus on individual needs and interests, whereas people in collectivist cultures are very much focused on group needs and group interests. Accordingly, Earley (1989) notes in his studies that members of collectivist cultures work better in groups. In contrast members of individualist cultures work better on their own.

Further, employees may not be familiar with autonomy or participation. In East Asian cultures members are raised to embrace interdependence (Markus & Kitayama 1991). At home parents are called upon to care for and guide their children. In return, children are obliged to display filial piety (Hwa Froelich & Vigil 2004). In schools, teachers are regarded as ‘gurus’ and tasked with the responsibility to direct students’ learning. The students’ responsibilities are to defer to and obey the teachers (Hofstede 1984, 1986).

A study on children by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) highlights this close dependence. They conducted a series of tests on a group of children and found that Anglo American children
performed better when they were able to make their own decisions. In contrast, Asian American children performed better when a trusted authority made decisions for them. These strong feelings of interdependence are invariably carried over to the workplace. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) observe that in individualist cultures, there is much less dependence on the managers, so employees prefer to be consulted on decisions. In collective hierarchical cultures, there is considerably more dependence, and hence employees prefer ‘to be told what to do’ (p. 73).

Further, any inclination towards autonomy and participation on the employees’ part may be hampered by their ability. Both practices invariably place specific demands on employees. Lussier and Achua (2009) for example, argue that participation is more than just telling employees to get more involved. It frequently entails equipping them with a set of skills in organising, planning, decision-making and importantly, communication skills in order to be able to participate. McShane and von Glinow (2008) point out that workplace tensions and poor performance will invariably result if employees are not sufficiently equipped and trained for autonomy or participation. Eylon and Au’s (1999) study only highlights the importance of training. They closely studied the effects of providing autonomy and discretionary decision making to MBA students from high and low power distant cultures. Both sets of student participants reported higher levels of work satisfaction. Nonetheless the performances of students from high power distance cultures declined markedly with autonomy and discretion. This has been attributed in part to a lack of familiarity and the absence of the right skills set.

In sum, the challenge remains for the manager who is bent on work independence and participation from their employees in Vietnam. However, addressing the issues of different interests, familiarity of roles and ability would help matters. The local employees’ ability due lack of training appeared most relevant. Trung and Swierczek (2009) observe that local institutions frequently fail to equip their graduates adequately because of their focus on theory. Scott and Bannon (2008), and Nguyen and Robinson (2010) similarly argue that, owing to their training, the employees often lack the skills that foreign managers take for granted, hence the importance of training. One manager in the focus group clearly pointed out the importance of training the employees: ‘because they don’t know what to do they wait for instructions. But if they know what to do they would be able to work independently, no problems on that’.
5.2.2 Close relations and close support

The employees had a different perspective from that of managers on these matters. Several employees were concerned with the lack of close relations with their managers and supervisors. They wanted the managers to be more ‘friendly’ and ‘approachable’. As one employee explains, they don’t relish coming into the office every day to face a ‘cold’ and ‘distant’ manager. The employees’ concerns have also been written about at length in the literature.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) note that members of individualist cultures tend to see the self as closely connected to others. To them success and achievement is viewed in terms of their relation to important others. Correspondingly, Aycan (2004) observes that one of the key features of collectivist countries like Vietnam is the importance placed on relationships in organisations. Managers in these cultures go to great lengths to establish close, supportive ties with their subordinates. Hofstede (1984) similarly argues that with individualist cultures, manager-employee relationships tend to be distant and transactional. The focus is on the employees contributing their time in exchange for wages. In direct contrast, manager-employee relationships in collectivist cultures tend to be closer and more familial.

The participants were also concerned with a perceived lack of support from their managers. The employees articulated numerous challenges at work. They wanted more help or support from their managers but felt they were not very forthcoming. On the one hand, younger employees especially wanted more support in terms of direction and instructions. Older employees, on the other hand, wanted more support in terms of problem solving and dealing with difficult situations. Close support has been discussed in the literature. Misumi (1985) notes, that in collectivist cultures, good leaders are seen as both warm and supportive. Close support is also part of the paternalistic leadership style favored by the collectivist East Asians (Pellegrini & Scandura 2008). According to Farh and Cheng (2000), paternalistic leadership is a combination of the authoritarian and the benevolent leader. In other words, the paternalistic leader is both directive and supportive (Dorfman et al. 1997), and demanding and nurturing (Sinha 1990).

Chen and Lee (2008) note that paternalism comes from the Confucian emphasis on ‘right relationships’ in the family, where the father’s duty is to provide for and care for the son and the son’s duty is to defer to the father. The idea is that if ‘right relationships’ are maintained, the family will remain strong and cohesive, which will in turn feed into a peaceful and
harmonious society. The Confucian beliefs on ‘right relationships’ are invariably transferred to the workplace, where the managers are obliged to look out for their employees and the employees are obliged to remain loyal and committed to their managers. In Vietnam, Borton (2000) similarly talks about the importance of having ‘right relationships’ at work. This focus on ‘right relationships’ dates back to when Vietnam was under the patronage of the Chinese. Quang and Vuong (2002) and Zhu (2003) correspondingly find the preferred management style in local Vietnamese companies to be both familial and paternalistic, where the company is often seen like a family and co-workers its family members.

The focus on close support in collectivist cultures is reflected in a number of leadership studies. For example, a key finding from Dorfman et al.’s (1997) study on leadership behaviours across five countries was the ‘cultural universality’ of the supportive leader. That is, all the study participants regardless of nationality favoured the leader who took interest in and were concerned for them. Additionally the study found participants from collectivist high power distance cultures such as Taiwan and Mexico were especially partial to the directive leader. Consistent with the idea of paternalism, the collectivist Taiwanese and Mexican participants were more satisfied with, and committed to leaders who supported and directed them in their jobs.

Like their managers, the employees’ expectations for close support may face resistance. The literature articulated a number of challenges to the realisation of such expectations. Aycan (2004) observes that close, supportive relationships can be perceived quite negatively in individualist Western cultures. Personal involvement with employees, for example, is often associated with interference or worse, invasion of privacy, rather than a show of concern and interest. Further, close relationships are often considered unprofessional. The focus on good relations is generally perceived to result in poor, subjective decision-making. The fear is that staffing, appraisal and promotion decisions based on good relations will facilitate favouritism and nepotism at work (Aycan 2004). Finally, as mentioned earlier, managers from individualist cultures are partial to work autonomy (Erez 1997, 2010). They tend to believe that employees should be able to work on their own with minimal support, supervision or direction.

Nevertheless, a number of studies indicate that managers can also be close and supportive. Barrow (1976), in his study, notes that good employee performances can often result in leaders becoming closer and more supportive of employees. In direct contrast, weak or poor
employee performances can often persuade leaders to become more distant and task oriented. This means that the managers’ behaviours depend to a large extent on the employees. If the employees want a close and supportive leader, they can help by turning in good work performances. Good work performances will persuade the task-oriented manager to be closer and more supportive.

5.2.3 Summary

The managers and employees had different and often conflicting expectations of each other in terms of work roles or work duties. Nevertheless, these roles are what they believed to be ‘right’ and ‘proper’, and would facilitate better work performance. The managers’ preferences for employee autonomy and participation are well documented. Employee autonomy and employee participation are also management practices that are commonly utilised in international companies to boost organisational performances and productivity. Nevertheless, in the context of collectivist cultures such as that of Vietnam, a number of questions are raised, namely: Is autonomy appropriate? Are the employees sufficiently equipped for it? Are they comfortable with it? The literature indicates that there are several issues to be addressed before implementation including interests, ability and familiarity with roles.

In addition, there is the belief that managers should only implement practices that best suit the employees. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) observe that there is little difference in effectiveness between various practices. But most important is the selection by management of practices that ‘utilise the strength of the local culture’ (p. 75). Likewise, Schneider (1988) warns that only when there is a match between organisational practice and national culture, will the practices be accepted. When there is a poor match, the same practice will inevitably encounter resistance and results in poor performance. Thus, managers should consider carefully what works best for the employees and for themselves.

Similarly, local employees’ preference for close support from their managers has been referred to in the literature. The bigger question is: Are close supportive ties appropriate today? Can employees expect them in the modern workplace? Do they affect objectivity and professionalism? If so can they be managed adequately? Or should they be relegated in favour of work relations that are more arms-length, transactional and focused on results? Farh and Cheng (2000) observe that close supportive ties inherent in paternalistic leadership have often been vilified by Western cultures. This is unfortunate in view of the finding by Farh and
Cheng (2000) that when utilised appropriately, paternalism can produce the most committed and productive employees.

The difference in role expectations underlines the level of employee empowerment that the managers and employees are comfortable with. Employee empowerment has been written about at length in the management literature. Kotter (2001) and Miller et al. (2012) observe that one of the major functions of the manager today is to empower their employees. Empowerment generally refers to giving the employees the power to take responsibility and make decisions. It is closely aligned with the individualist culture’s emphasis on equality and achievement (Hofstede 1984). Various authors, including den Hartog (2004), observe an inexorable trend towards employee empowerment in the international workplace. Employees today are urged to take on duties and responsibilities that previously belonged to managers.

This worldwide trend of ‘empowering’ employees with more duties and responsibilities is seen as an antidote for the intense competition occurring at the marketplace today. It has become part of the culture or ‘the way things are done around here’ of many international companies (Schneider 1988, p. 232). Where previously the managers played the role of mentor or coach tasked with guiding their employees, today their roles have morphed into that of a facilitator whose task is to ensure their employees achieve their objectives. This requires the employees to ‘step up to the plate’. Employees today are urged to assume new roles and perform associated duties and responsibilities to assist management to better compete in the marketplace. Employees who adhere to the traditional modus operandi of following instructions and maintaining status quo will invariably find themselves sidelined.

Nonetheless, to be fair, managers should also inform employees of the change in roles. Better still, managers should equip the employees’ for the change. This is highlighted in the recommendations discussed in Chapter 6.

5.3 Work communication

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was work communication. The managers and employees frequently spoke of work communication as a problem or concern. Communication has been written about in the literature. In general, communication refers to the process whereby information is shared and understood (McShane & von Glinow 2008). The managers and employees, however, had very different ideas on what communication they wanted from each other. The managers’ perspective is discussed first followed by the employees’.
5.3.1 Asking questions, giving feedback and sharing information

The managers were concerned with the lack of communication coming from their employees. They wanted more communication in terms of asking questions, giving feedback and sharing of information. Especially pressing for managers was the need for more asking of questions. Several managers said that the employees should ask for help if they needed it, or ask for instructions if they were not clear about what they had to do. The literature deals extensively with the critical role questioning plays in communication. Asking questions appears to be an integral part of work communication in Western cultures. Waterman et al. (2001) point out that asking questions is fundamental to communication at work. Hargie and Dickson (2004) add that questioning may simply be a request for information, but it is also one of the most powerful tools for clarifying directions, gaining feedback, seeking agreement and more.

The other concern of the managers was feedback. They wanted the employees to provide more feedback on work progress, issues or problems encountered and mistakes made on the job. They felt that they often did not know what was going on at work. A lot of the literature in the management arena has been devoted to giving and receiving feedback in the workplace. Lussier and Achua (2009), for example, note that in the workplace, managers often set goals for their employees. Feedback from the employees, in turn, helps managers determine how much progress they have made towards their goals. The employees’ feedback also helps managers assess the need for further action or any change in direction required to better achieve the goals set (Locke & Latham 2002).

Generally, the managers focused on the employees’ verbal communication. They wanted the employees to be able to speak or talk with their superiors. The managers’ focus on talk has been written about in the literature. Gudykunst (2004) and Samovar et al. (2009) note the preference for talk in individualist cultures. Giles et al. (1992), in turn, observe the inclination in individualist cultures to view talk as pleasant, as important, and as a way of controlling goings on at work. In short, the main idea behind talk is that of control. With talk the managers are better able to keep tabs on goings on at work or simply make sure that jobs gets completed on time. The role of talk as a control measure is given added impetus by the managers’ focus on autonomy. With autonomy or work independence, managers still need to know what is going on at work. Control through employee feedback and questioning, however, is much more amenable to close supervision and direction.
The foreign managers’ expectations for talk however face a number of impediments. Various writers have made references to the collectivist cultures’ disinclination for talk. They found members of collectivist cultures such as the Vietnamese to be less willing to share information about themselves (Ting-Toomey 1991) and more apprehensive about talk (Kim 2002). When they do talk, however, they tend to be implicit and indirect (Gudykunst 1988), and modest and self-effacing (Kitayama et al. 1997).

The literature on collectivist cultures suggests a number of reasons for this. One reason that has often been mentioned is roles and duties. Samovar et al. (2009) point out that at home, American parents tend to encourage their children to voice their ideas and opinions. In East Asia, however, children learn from a young age the importance of ‘knowing your place’ and keeping quiet in the presence of older, more authoritative figures. The general perception is that young children should be seen, not heard. This is further reinforced in schools where communication is invariably one way – teacher to students. As explained earlier, the duty of the teacher in East Asia is to direct the students’ learning, and the duty of the students is to defer to the teacher. Hwa-Froelich and Westby (2003) observe that in collectivist East Asia, children are socialised to defer to and respect their teachers, which includes not questioning or disagreeing with them. This state of affairs inevitably finds its way to the workplace. Dickson, den Hartog and Mitchelson (2003) observe that in collectivist, high power distance cultures, employees are unlikely to challenge or to disagree with their managers.

Consideration for others is often mentioned in the literature as closely linked to roles. Kim (1993) and Ting-Toomey (1994) note that when communicating, members of collectivist cultures are often subject to a variety of constraints including concern for ‘face’. In essence, members will not talk if they feel they will embarrass and offend important others. When they do talk, they are inclined to be indirect and discreet to preserve the positive image of others and maintain good relations. This goes back to their feelings for interdependence, good relations and harmony (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Aycan (2004) observes that this concern for ‘face’ invariably deters employees from giving feedback. In particular, they will avoid criticism or negative feedback towards older and more senior managers. The fear is that negative feedback will cause the managers to lose face, undermine good relations and attract negative consequences.

Competency and confidence are also issues important in communication at work. Employees will not talk if they feel they are ill equipped and lack confidence. Lussier and Achua (2009)
note that employees will avoid asking questions or giving feedback if they feel it will make them look bad or make them look like they don't know what they are doing. Ayres (1997) points out that there are two aspects of communication apprehension, namely communication competence and negative evaluation. That is, people will be highly apprehensive of communication if they feel they lack the necessary skills and will be negatively evaluated for it. In the main, communication assumes a certain level of skill. For example, there are requisite skills involved in asking questions, like knowing what questions to ask, when to ask them and most importantly how to ask the questions. The same goes for contributing ideas, giving feedback and sharing pertinent information. Additionally, the skills required will invariably increase when communicating with senior or higher level executives. Any perceived lack will inevitably make the employees more apprehensive or more reluctant to communicate.

More recently, there has been increasing interest in the United States in studying the employees’ inclination or rather disinclination to speak up in organisations (Edmondson & Detert 2007; Milliken et al. 2003). Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003), for instance, interviewed forty employees from different industries including financial services, pharmaceuticals and advertising. They found the employees were reluctant to communicate with their superiors even if they had issues or concerns. The major reasons given were familiar: fear of being labelled negatively, fear of damaging relationships, fear of reprimand and punishment, or simply fear that speaking up will not make any difference.

Of greater significance, Milliken et al. (2003) observe that the employees’ reluctance to communicate can be mitigated by reducing hierarchy. That is, employees are more likely to communicate with their managers if there is less power differential at work. Furthermore, any employee hesitation for communication can be reduced by providing a safe place and by close relations. That is, employees are more willing to speak if there is little potential for adverse consequences and the managers are perceived as open and approachable. Although conducted in the Unites States, the study findings resonate in East Asia. The fear of speaking up and challenging superiors appears to cut across cultures. The only difference may be the extent of the fear, which is directly influenced by hierarchy or power differential. In the East Asian hierarchical context, the employees’ fears will invariably be amplified and subsequently dampen their inclination to talk.
In summary, getting the local employees to communicate remains a challenge. Nevertheless, addressing some of the factors mentioned should help matters considerably. For younger employees, communication skills appeared particularly pertinent. As one employee puts it, they are ‘trained in language skills but not in communication skills’. Various studies on Vietnam similarly refer to the local employees’ communication skills as a concern (Duoc & Metzger 2007; Trung & Swierczek 2009; World Bank 2012, 2013). These studies provide few details but they do refer to the employees’ inadequacies in communication skills that threaten to undermine their performance at work. Helping the employees acquire these skills would go a long way towards making the employees more able and more confident to communicate with their managers.

5.3.2 Listening to concerns and opinions

The employees were similarly concerned with the lack of work communication coming from their managers, particularly listening. The employees wanted their managers to attend to their concerns, opinions and generally what was said. The employees’ concerns have been discussed in the literature. Yum (1988) observes that communication in East Asian cultures is not only modest and discreet, but also receiver-centred. The onus is on the receiver to listen and understand the message. Lustig and Koester (2010) observe that East Asians practice what is called listener-responsible language where speakers only need to indicate indirectly what they want, whilst the listener is obliged to listen carefully and try to understand what the speaker is really saying based on context and non-verbal cues.

The employees were especially concerned by the managers’ inattention to the many issues at work. The employees described numerous issues at work including tight deadlines, difficult colleagues, and demanding clients. The feeling was the managers could help by attending to the issues they encountered at work. The employees’ concerns have been referred to in the literature. Much has been written on the imperative of providing sufficient support to employees to boost morale and performance. In the previously mentioned study by Dorfman et al. (1997), the supportive leader was preferred across all five cultures studied. That is, all the employees regardless of their background or training preferred the supportive leader who took interest in and concerned themselves with their employees. In the context of East Asia, Chen and Chung (1994) observe that managers can be strict and disciplinarian but they must also ensure that their employees’ needs are well taken care of. Taking care of employees invariably involves listening to them, and attending to the many concerns they have at work.
The other concern of the employees was that managers should listen to their opinions. The employees often had different ideas on how things could be done at work, including work processes, work procedures and business strategies. Nonetheless, some of them felt that they were not listened to or worse, that their ideas were not important. The employees’ concerns appear to challenge the many stereotypes that collectivist cultures such as the Vietnamese lack individual ideas or opinions. The theory is that group goals and interests supersede individual goals and interest for collectivist cultures (Triandis 1995). Therefore, individual ideas and opinions should be of little relevance. Nonetheless, the local employees’ desire to be heard has been observed by several authors conducting research in Vietnam.

Ashwill and Thai (2006), Berrell, Wright and Hoa (1999) and Borton (2000) highlight the importance of listening and providing for xin phep at the workplace. Xin phep simply means being kind enough to take time and listen to the employee. According to the authors, xin phep is about giving the employees respect and adhering to ‘right relationships’. That is, managers are expected to listen to their employees because that is considered right and proper behaviour for a superior. Aycan (2004) similarly talks about the importance of listening in emerging and collectivist countries like Vietnam. He points out that the local managers may not be participative, but they are consultative. They will always make it a point to listen carefully to their employees and show that their opinions and ideas are valued and respected. This in turn increases the employees’ job satisfaction.

Like the managers, the employees face a number of hurdles in their expectations for listening. The first is the idea that the managers’ may not be familiar with the local employees’ indirect and implicit communication style, including the various nuances and subtleties. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) observe that managers from individualist cultures are more inclined towards the direct and explicit communication style, while local employees from collectivist cultures are more inclined towards the indirect communication style. The managers may also be unaware of the higher requirement for listening that follows from the employees’ indirect communication style. Yum (1988) notes that listening in Asian cultures is definitely more complex; it not only involves ears to hear what is said, but also the eyes and mind to understand the situational context and the non-verbal messages sent, which all entail a certain amount of skill. This requirement for listening only increases in the context of the manager and employee relationships.
Next, findings from a number of recent studies also indicate that managers, in certain situations, really do not listen. See, Morrison, Rothman and Soll (2011) conducted a study on 208 business graduate students at a private university. The students were assigned different levels of power or position and asked to make decisions. The results showed that participants in higher positions of authority tended to make decisions on their own without seeking input from others. The results of the study suggest that the greater the power or influence that one has at work, the less likely one is to take advice from others. Similarly, in studies by Tost, Gino and Larrick (2011), it was found that increased power persuaded the leaders to dominate discussions, which in turn prevented other team members from contributing. These studies also found that teams with powerful leaders had lower levels of open communication and lower team performance.

Findings by See et al. (2011) and Tost et al. (2011) illustrate the negative effects of power differentials in communication. In the context of Confucian East Asia, power is a very relevant theme. The Confucian adherence to hierarchy confers on managers wide-ranging powers over the employees, possibly affecting their ability or willingness to listen. Nonetheless Tost et al. (2011) provide a caveat. They note that managers will listen if they believe that their employees have something valuable to contribute. Dickson et al. (2003) similarly add that managers will listen if they feel that it is in their best interests to do so.

To sum up, getting managers to listen presents a challenge. The onus remains on the employees to convince managers that whatever they have to say is valuable, and is of interest to them. Nevertheless the idea of calling the manager’s attention because it is in his or her best interests to do so elevates the issue of communication skills once again. Convincing the managers that what is said is important and valuable invariably requires the employees to have communication skills, including questioning, explaining, persuading and asserting skills. These skills however do not come naturally, but must be acquired and developed.

5.3.3 Summary

In this study, the managers and employees had very different expectations of what they want from each other in terms of work communication. The foreign managers’ desire for employees to ask questions, give feedback and share ideas and opinions are well documented in the literature. These are communication behaviours that they believe are ‘right’ and will facilitate good work performance. Nonetheless, the literature also indicates a number of issues that need to be addressed before the managers can insist on talk, including role perception,
relationship concerns, fear of reprimand and inadequate communication skills. One way the managers can encourage talk is by encouraging close relations and minimising hierarchy. Apparently, employees are more willing to communicate with their managers when there are closer relations and when the power distance are minimised (Milliken et al. 2003).

Similarly, the local employees’ concerns and expectations for communication, particularly listening, have been documented by various authors. These are communication behaviours that they believe are appropriate and would boost employee morale and work performance. Nevertheless, the literature also articulates a number of obstacles to the employees’ expectations. These include the managers’ lack of familiarity with indirect communication and the heightened power distance in hierarchical Vietnam which will persuade the managers to dominate discussions and pay less attention to others (Tost et al. 2011). All is not lost, however; the literature notes that employees can get their managers to listen if they can convince them that they have something of value to say (Tost et al. 2011), or that it would be in the manager’s best interest to listen (Dickson et al. 2003). This, however, requires the employees to raise their communication skills in order to be heard.

The managers’ and employees’ focus on talk and listening respectively underlines the different patterns of communication that they are comfortable with relative to their cultures. The literature on culture and communication is extensive. Hall (1976), Samovar et al. (2008) and Yum (1988) point out that members of individualist cultures tend to focus on direct communication which emphasises talk, whilst members of collectivist cultures tend to focus on indirect communication which emphasises listening. The managers’ and employees’ focus on talk and listening respectively also underlines how communication is often aligned to perceptions of roles and duties at work. The managers’ beliefs in the virtues of empowered employees, for example, would lead them to expect more direct, assertive talk from their employees. The employees’ desire for a supportive manager on the other hand would lead them to expect more careful listening.

5.4 Communication orientation

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was communication orientation. Both managers and employees frequently alluded to communication orientation as a problem or concern. The managers and employees had very different ideas not only on what should be communicated but also how it should be communicated. The managers’ perspectives are discussed first, followed by the employees’.
5.4.1 Proactive communication

One concern of managers related to communication orientation was proactivity. A sizable number of the managers expressed a desire for employees to be more proactive when asking questions, giving feedback and exchanging information. The feeling was that employees should not wait for managers to ask them for feedback, but should volunteer feedback immediately.

Similarly, the employees should not wait for the managers to query them on work issues but should inform them about the issues as soon as possible so they can be addressed. The managers’ concern for proactivity has been referred to in the literature. Covey (2004, p. 32) contends that proactivity refers to taking initiative, to taking action to ‘make things happen,’ or ‘get things done’. It is also about taking responsibility for achieving goals and not allowing external factors to derail them. Proactivity and initiative are related to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) value orientation of mastery over harmony and doing versus being. Whilst members of collectivist cultures are more inclined to believe that they should live in harmony with others around them and are therefore focused on good relations, those from individualist cultures are more inclined to master the environment around them and are therefore focused on activities and getting things done.

Correspondingly, Gannon and Newman (2001) observe that together with independence and self-reliance, initiative remains one of the core values of individualist cultures such as the United States. Everyday sayings that individualist cultures hold dear such as ‘success is what you make it’ or ‘you make your own luck’, reflect their preference for mastery and initiative. Accordingly, employees who show initiative are viewed more favourably and rewarded. The reverse is, unfortunately, also true for those who do not. Samovar et al. (2009) point out that managers from the United States tend to reward achievement, initiative, action and results more than loyalty or good relationships.

Nevertheless, any expectation for proactive communication in Vietnam faces a number of hurdles. The East Asian collectivist cultural ideas on initiative can differ from this considerably. The focus of collectivist cultures is on fitting in and subordinating individual goals to group goals (Fiske et al. 1998). The Confucian philosophy assumes that everyone has a role to play and a duty to perform. The general idea is that if everyone assumes their rightful role, good relations and importantly harmony will prevail. By way of contrast, taking initiative that entails going beyond one’s perceived role and duty can be seen as
insubordination, even defiance. Since acting beyond one's prescribed roles can often attract
censure, even ridicule, it should be avoided as much as possible. Aycan (2004) similarly
observes that in collectivist developing countries like Vietnam, employees tend to struggle to
take initiative. Aycan, however, puts forward a slightly different reason for this, namely that
employees will not take initiative because they feel they are not able to control the external
situation.

This feeling comes in part from the unpredictable social and economic environment, and from
the emphasis on collective decision-making and responsibility. Similarly, Ashwill and Thai
(2006) and Smith and Pham (1996) observe that employees in Vietnam often struggle with
taking initiative, being unfamiliar with it. Apparently, taking initiative and risk-taking were
not qualities that were valued under the old centralised and collective, economic and political
system in Vietnam. The focus was on fitting in and working together for the common good.
Hence, conformity and obedience were encouraged rather than taking initiative.

Nevertheless, Scott and Bannon (2008) argue that the Vietnamese employees can be very
hardworking and resourceful if necessary. Thang et al. (2007) specifically notes that doing
nothing and blaming failures on others is not an attitude that is appreciated in Vietnamese
culture. Similarly, Borton (2000) points out that the local employees can be proactive but only
if they are not ‘micromanaged’ or not closely supervised and directed. This corresponds to the
observation of Tost et al. (2011) that taking initiative is a function of power or influence. That
is, when the employees feel that they have the ability to influence the outcomes of their jobs,
they can be persuaded to take more initiative. Lewin et al. (1939) in their early studies on
leadership styles, similarly observed that when employees were allowed to contribute
suggestions or provide input to decision making they were more likely to take initiative.

For managers who insist that their employees take more initiative in terms of communication,
the implication is that more autonomy or discretion should be provided. Employees would be
more inclined to take initiative in terms of asking questions, giving feedback and volunteering
information if they felt they were not directed or not instructed what to do all the time.
Questions, however, still remain as to the employees’ readiness for work independence and
autonomy. Consequently, one manager talked about ‘empowering the employees to succeed’.
The plan is to progressively empower the employees and provide buffers so they can still
make mistakes and learn from them.
Closely related to this, is the idea of providing employees with a safe place so they will not be afraid of taking initiative. That is, employees will be more proactive in communication if there is no danger of reprimand or punishment.

5.4.2 Respect and understanding

One concern expressed by the employees with regards to communication orientation was respect. The word ‘respect’ was frequently mentioned during the interviews. A common complaint from the employees was that their managers did not afford them the respect they believed they deserve. The employees’ concern for respect has been referred to at length in the literature. The universal desire for appreciation and respect may explain in part the popularity of the supportive leader. Dorfman et al. (1997) observed in their study the wide appeal of the supportive leader among many different cultures. One defining trait of the supportive leader is that they are concerned not only with their employees’ welfare but they are also concerned with communicating mutual trust and respect (House 1996).

Respect is generally equated with esteem, regard, appreciation and honour (Samovar et al. 2009). In East Asia, however, respect is also equated with being polite (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998) and being implicit and indirect (Yum 1988). Additionally, there is the idea that respect is intricately linked to face concerns (Cardon & Scott 2003). Face can be defined as a person’s public image (Brown & Levinson 1987). According to Cardon and Scott (2003), face comes from the Confucian concern for right relationships. To ensure right relationships are maintained, careful attention must be given to face-saving and face giving. Redding and Ng (1983) observe that in businesses in East Asia, face saving and face giving are two of the most important skills that employees can have when communicating.

The focus on ‘face’ saving is to ensure that either party does not get embarrassed in the process of communicating. According to Hwang (1987) and Cardon & Scott (2003), ‘face loss’ can occur when there are open disagreements or direct challenges, refusal of requests or ill-tempered behaviours, and condescending or patronising attitudes. Alternatively, ‘face giving’ ensures that the other person’s reputation, name and honour are enhanced. In turn, it can be facilitated by affording praise and recognition, giving attention and listening or being accommodative and collaborative with the employees. Both ‘face saving’ and ‘face giving’ ensure mutual respect, good relations and maintenance of harmony at work.
The literature from Vietnam similarly talks about the importance of ‘face’. According to Borton (2000), the loss of face is akin to a fate worse than death in Vietnam. Smith and Pham (1996) similarly point out that in Vietnam ‘face’ or a person’s public image is very important. Hence, public criticism and disparaging remarks that can cause offense and embarrassment should be avoided as much as possible. Likewise, a direct refusal or a negative answer that can cause others to lose face should be avoided. Zhu (2003) observes that Vietnamese society is one that is very much focused on egalitarianism and mutual respect. As a result, Borton (2000, p. 123) observes that the expatriates who succeed in Vietnam are the ones who treat the locals as equals and adhere to the Vietnamese core cultural values of ‘belonging, consultation, right relationships, and respect.’

Nevertheless, the employees’ desire for respect in the form they are familiar with presents several challenges. The individualist managers’ ideas on respect can differ considerably. Lustig and Koester (2010) note that displays of respect tend to be culture-specific. That is, different cultures have different ways of demonstrating respect. For example, whilst individualist cultures may have similar ideas on ‘face’, the collectivist East Asian concept of ‘face’ is much deeper and more complex (Cardon & Scott 2003) requiring adherence to specific formalities or behavioural norms. These formalities, if not adhered to, can be a source of disaffection and discontent for the parties concerned.

The employees were also concerned with understanding. The words ‘understanding’ or ‘lack of understanding’ were frequently used in the interviews. The employees expressed a desire for their managers to better understand how business is conducted in Vietnam, and also to comprehend some aspects of their values and traditions. This desire for understanding has been referred to in the literature. Understanding is synonymous with empathy. According to Adler and Rodman (2006), there are really three aspects to empathy. The first aspect is to take on the views of others or ‘to put oneself in another person’s shoes’. The second aspect involves setting aside one’s opinions. The third aspect of empathy is to concern oneself with the welfare of the other person.

Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) identify a number of key requirements for the expatriate managers to succeed in their foreign postings. Significantly, they include other-orientation, and perceptual ability as a key dimension. Essentially, the greater the willingness of the foreign managers to build relationships and understand their employees, the greater the likelihood they will succeed. Mendenhall and Odou’s findings are consistent with those of
writers like Gudykunst (2004) and Hofstede (2001), who assert that understanding of the other culture's values, beliefs and subsequently norms, is imperative for ensuring effective work.

The employees’ desire for understanding, however, faces a number of hurdles. A number of writers noted the inability or unwillingness of managers to understand local employees. Hieu (2013), in his study on joint ventures in Vietnam, notes that the foreign managers often find it difficult to comprehend the local employees’ indirect communication style. The employees’ inclination to say ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no’ for example frequently resulted in occurrences of misunderstanding and conflict with the foreign managers at work.

Ralston, Nguyen and Napier (1999), in turn, observe that managers from developed economies, more familiar with rules and procedures than with local customs, often find it difficult to understand the need for personal relationships in businesses in emerging economies like Vietnam. Similarly, Berrell, Wright and Hoa (1999) find in their study of one Australian company in Vietnam that the foreign managers tended to disregard the importance of relationship networks in business, making them rather ineffectual in the process. Ralston, Nguyen and Napier (1999) also point out that managers often cannot understand how slowly businesses in developing countries like Vietnam can move due to the extensive bureaucracy, and weak regulatory and legal structures. Likewise, Quelch and Dinh-Tan (1998) find foreign managers often cannot appreciate the amount of time needed to deal with bureaucracy and red tape in Vietnam. Reflecting this, Risher and Stopper (2000) find that for the American managers working in Vietnam, one of the main sources of anxiety is their inability to get as many things done in a day as they would like to.

To sum up, getting managers to show respect and understanding remains a challenge. On the employees’ part, greater effort should be made to ensure the managers understand what makes for respectful communication and how business is actually conducted in Vietnam. The managers may have different understandings of what constitutes respectful communication, particularly when ‘face’ concerns are factored in. The managers may also have very different understandings of how business should be conducted that have little relevance to Vietnam. Thus, the onus is on the employees to explain the different customs to them, which invariably involves them speaking up. The alternative for them is to live with what they deem to be a lack of respect or understanding coming from their managers.
5.4.3 Summary

Both managers and employees have very different concerns and expectations of each other in terms of communication orientation. The managers’ expectations of proactive behaviour on the part of the employees are well documented in the literature. Their belief is that proactive communication will result in good work performance. However, the local Vietnamese employees may not agree. For example, instead of seeing proactivity as taking initiative to get things done or taking responsibility, initiative may be perceived as not knowing your place in the organisation, or being rebellious and disobedient.

Nonetheless, the interviews and the literature suggest that proactivity can still be encouraged. Managers can begin this process by informing the employees that proactive communication is not only allowed but encouraged. Proactivity can be further facilitated by providing the employees some autonomy and discretion and not micromanaging them. Closely related to this, is the idea of providing employees with a safe work place so they will not be afraid of taking initiative. Rewarding the employees rather than punishing them will get them to be more proactive, not only with communication but also other more mundane tasks.

Similarly, the employees’ desire for respect and understanding has been highlighted in the literature by various authors. These are behaviours that would promote mutual trust and involvement in the company. Research in Vietnam points to the imperative of understanding not only how business is conducted in a country, but also how and why the locals behave the way they do. Borton (2000), Sergeant and Frenkel (1998), and Zhu (2003), for example, note that the key to management success in places like Vietnam is one of good understanding and respect.

Nevertheless, gaining respect and understanding from foreign managers’ may be a challenge. The foreign managers may have very different ideas of what makes for respectful communication and what constitutes good business practices. Thus, the onus lies with the employees again. They need to articulate to the managers what makes for appropriate or inappropriate communication behaviours and business practices. The managers’ focus on proactive communication and the employees’ focus on respectful, empathetic communication underline their cultural orientation of doing versus being and mastery versus living in harmony with the environment, as proposed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961). These differences also reflect the desired communication behaviours that are aligned with the roles and duties that they expect each other to assume. For example, the supportive manager should...
not only be listening to the employees’ ideas and concerns, but they should also be listening with empathy and respect. Similarly, the empowered employees should not only be giving feedback when asked; they should also more be proactive in giving feedback so issues can be addressed and mistakes rectified quickly.

5.5 Language

The other theme coming forth from the interviews was language. Both managers and employees regularly referred to language as a problem or concern. Language has been explored at length in the literature. Gudykunst (2004), McShane and von Glinow (2010) and Adler and Rodman (2006) all talk about language as a barrier to communication between groups of people in organisations. Discussions of the managers’ concerns are presented first followed by the employees’.

5.5.1 Vocabulary and depth of understanding

Several managers were concerned with the employees’ language proficiency, including vocabulary and depth of understanding. The managers felt that the employees did not know enough words and the words they did know, they did not know them deeply enough. The managers’ concern for language has been discussed in the literature. The foreign managers will naturally want their employees to be proficient in the English language. For American- or European-based companies in HCMC, English will inevitably be the language of choice (Feely & Harzing 2003). Communication with the local authorities may be in Vietnamese but all other communication will be in English. McShane and von Glinow (2010) highlight the need for a common language such as English, particularly in international organisations, to facilitate communication, cooperation and work performance.

Nonetheless, the managers’ expectation for language proficiency faces a number of obstacles. For one, the primary language used in schools, secondary or tertiary, is Vietnamese. English language is only one of the many elective subjects taught in schools. Typically, rigorous English training can only be gained at considerable cost in the many private English language centres surrounding HCMC. Consequently, English language competency for most of the employees comes at a steep price, namely hard work and hard-earned money. This lack of access to English language training in terms of cost and availability will invariably affect the employees’ command of the language, including vocabulary and depth of understanding.
There is also the issue of curriculum. The schools may not have grounded the employees with the knowledge and learning that the managers take for granted. The employees’ lack of a deep understanding of the words and ideas used at work may simply be because they were not schooled in them. George (2010) and Hayden and Thiep (2007) all talk about the Vietnamese school curriculum being one that is oriented towards socialism. In direct contrast, many of the words in the English language represent ideas and concepts that are based on capitalism or the market-oriented economic model. Correspondingly, Thang et al. (2007) observe that the existing education system in Vietnam, which focuses on the Marxist-Leninist centrally planned economic system, often does not provide new graduates with the required knowledge or skills to work in a businesses operating in a market economy. Likewise, Nguyen and Robinson (2010, p. 30) point out that until recently commonly used words in business such as ‘innovation’, ‘entrepreneurship’, and ‘customer service’, did not even exist in the Vietnamese language. As a result, Quelch and Dinh-Tan (1998) and Nguyen and Robinson (2010) refer to the need for foreign managers to frequently explain to their employees the language and fundamentals of the market economy.

In sum, finding employees who are proficient in the English language remains a challenge. If the managers insist on proficiency in English, their selection policies should be tightened accordingly. However, tightening their employee selection policies would considerably narrow the pool of potential employees that they can access. With the influx of private schools offering international curriculums (Mai et al. 2009), the pool of workers who are proficient in the English language and familiar with the Western economic and management model will continue to grow. Nevertheless it will still remain a small segment of the total labour market.

The alternative is for managers to consider offering the employees language training, including training on industry-specific vocabulary. This, however, would increase the cost of doing business in Vietnam. Thus, managers need to seriously assess the cost versus the benefits of language training for employees.

5.5.2 Rate of speech, accent, and jargon

The employees similarly expressed concerns over language use. However, they were more concerned with language clarity, or rather, the lack of it. Several employees complained about their managers’ propensity to talk quickly, articulate strange accents and use a lot of jargon.
The employees’ concerns have been referred to in the literature. Samovar et al. (2008) note that non-native speakers of English tend to struggle when conversing with native speakers. From the non-native speakers’ perspectives, native speakers tend to speak too fast and use too many difficult words.

With regards to rapid speech, Samovar et al. (2008) observe that non-native speakers are inclined to translate the messages they receive into a language that they are more comfortable with. They will receive a message, translate the message, work on a response and translate it again before sending it off. The unintended consequences of this rather laborious process are further delays in the communication process. The employees will take much more time to grasp what their managers are saying and respond accordingly, which may in turn be cause for further misunderstanding if the managers fail to understand this.

With respect to accents, a number of studies have linked non-standard accents with poor listening comprehension. That is, strange accents will adversely impair the understanding of the messages received. In one study, 100 listeners from China, Japan, Spain and America were presented with brief lectures in English by presenters with different native languages. The listeners were then tested on their understanding of the lectures. The results indicated that all the listeners performed poorly when they listened to non-native English speakers (Major et al. 2002). For the local employees, their impaired ability to comprehend messages owing to strange accents will inevitably present them with a measure of concern and anxiety.

With regards to jargon, McShane and von Glinow (2010) observe that jargon or specialised language can both facilitate and impede communication at work. Whilst jargon can speed up communication for communicators who are familiar with it, the reverse is also true for communicators who are less familiar with the jargon used (Wagner & Hollenbeck 2009). Several of the employees pointed out that they were only trained in ‘general English.’ That is, the English training centres that they attended only provided them with the basics of the language. Industry-specific knowledge and jargon was inevitably absent from the curriculum, so employees often struggled when their managers used complex and specialised terms.

Behind the employees’ concern about rapid speech, strange accents and jargon however is a desire for clear communication and good work. The general sentiment coming from the employees was that they wanted the managers to be clear with work directions and instructions so they could carry out their assigned jobs effectively. Scott and Bannon (2008) similarly observe that the Vietnamese employees, like any other employees, want clear job
directions so they will be able to turn in good work performances. However, like their managers, the employees face a number of impediments to their expectations. One obvious impediment is time commitment. Busy managers are unlikely to be inclined to cater to the employees’ desire for clear communication. Caught up by the demands of their work and responsibilities, they will find it difficult to find time to give clear and organised instructions. There is also the idea that if the employees don’t understand, they should ask the managers to clarify matters if the instructions are unclear.

Another impediment is the lack of awareness and understanding. Lustig and Koestner (2011) point out that native speakers often fail to appreciate or comprehend the difficulties that non-native speakers experience. One commercial study done by the London School of English illustrates this (Wood, 2011). The study queried 100 human resource directors in the United Kingdom whose workforce included professional native and non-native speakers of English. Nearly all of them believed that their non-native English speaking employees were conversant in the language, and therefore would not need further training. Further, the directors did not consider it necessary to adapt their language for jargon or accent when communicating with their employees.

To sum up, getting the managers to be clear and organised remains a challenge. On the part of the employees, they should articulate their expectations for clear communication right at the outset. The employees should point out to the managers the difficulties they may face with accents or jargon and the need for clear communication. They should also speak up against what they feel as vague and ambiguous communication. Of course, there are numerous issues or challenges preventing the employees from doing so as discussed previously. The alternative for the employee, however, is to learn to deal with the increased uncertainty and possibly increased occurrences of mistakes.

5.5.3 Summary

Both managers and employees had clear expectations of one another with regard to language. The managers’ desire for language proficiency on the part of the employees has been referred to in the literature. The idea is that work performances will improve if everyone speaks the same language, and there are no language issues to contend with. The employees’ expectations for clear communication have also been documented. The belief is employees will be better able to produce good work if they receive clear and organised communication including work instructions.
In the main, the expectations about language appear to underline the managers and employees perceptions of the roles and duties that the other should assume. For example, from the managers’ perspective, the empowered employee would be better able to fulfill their responsibilities if they had a good command of the language. And from the employees’ point of view, a good way to support them would be to provide clear and organised instructions, free from strange accents and confusing jargon.

The expectations expressed by the managers and employees also appear to underline the different levels of fluency in the language of choice, English. With the managers and employees coming from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, their mastery of the language will inevitably vary, presenting a number of issues. This phenomenon has been written about at length by various authors including Harzing and Feely (2008) and Neeley, Hinds and Cramton (2009). With rapid globalisation comes diversity in the workforce. To maintain coherence, organisations that operate internationally are often compelled to adopt a common language.

Nonetheless, the use of a common language such as English has raised a number of pertinent issues. Firstly, the use of a common language can increase the possibility of raised emotions and misunderstanding. Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2009) studied 145 project teams of an organisation that had members from all over the world with varying levels of language proficiency in the common language, English. The difference in language proficiency between team members often led to tensions. The non-native speakers would be apprehensive over the need to speak English and the native speakers would be frustrated over feelings of being excluded. These negative emotions not only prevented the sharing of information, but also weakened cooperation and collaboration in the teams.

In addition, using a common language can create inequity. One study on language use in an American company in Japan (San Antonio 1987) found that language proficiency was often a criterion for advancement. Employees who were fluent in the common language were seen favourably. They were viewed as more competent and therefore more likely to get promoted. San Antonio’s findings corresponds with McCroskey et al. (1977) study results that links communication apprehension due to language or otherwise, with self-confidence and competency deficit. In summary, the use of a common language can indirectly discriminate against the local employees with weaker language skills.
Several writers also talked about the ability of language to empower or disempower the employees (Harzing & Feely 2008). Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2012) conducted a study on the use of English as the common language in a French technology company. They found that the French workers felt ‘devalued’ or ‘reduced’ when they were compelled to use English rather than French in their work. Apparently the employees felt a loss of power or status as they felt they were not as articulate or as influential in English. Essentially, employees who speak the corporate language will feel more power over those who do not. In the context of this present study, the foreign managers will gain more power simply by virtue of their English fluency. This will unwittingly increase the already high power distance between the managers and employees here, potentially undermining open communication and good relations. As indicated earlier, high power distance has the potential to hinder employees from asking for help and from communicating feedback, which will in turn create a whole new set of issues (Milliken et al. 2003, See et al. 2011).

Suffice to say, imposing a common language disadvantages the local employees considerably. Hence, for the managers, the issue remains: should they continue insisting on a common language? Various studies have found that successful managers are the ones who are most adaptable, and most willing to learn the culture they are living with. Arguably, this should include learning and communicating in the local language. Nevertheless, if the managers still insist on a common language they should be wary of the issue of power differential and the possibility of increased tension.

5.6 Coping responses or strategies

A final theme that emerged from the interviews was coping responses or strategies. Both managers and employees had their own ways of responding to what they perceived as problems or concerns.

5.6.1 Close supervision vs reducing distance

A number of the managers talked about close supervision and direction. That is, they were inclined to impose close supervision and direction if the employees did not proactively ask questions, give feedback or raise issues. The managers’ inclination has been discussed in the literature. Bass and Bass (2009) refer to the inclination of leaders and managers towards tasks when their employees do not perform as expected. Barrow (1976), in a laboratory experiment found that when the performances of subordinates were high, the leaders became more
supportive. Conversely, when the performances of subordinates were low, the leaders tended to become more task and goal oriented.

In retrospect, the managers’ responses were inevitable. Failure on the employees’ part to communicate only raises the managers’ fears that the jobs assigned will not be delivered on time or will not meet required standards. This lack of communication will in turn persuade them to take preemptive measures, including giving the employees clear instructions, checking in on them frequently or requiring them to report on their work more regularly. As one manager in the interviews points out ‘communication is all about confidence’. Communication would help allay some of the managers’ fears. The more the employees communicate, the more confidence the managers will have in their employees. Unfortunately, the reverse is true when there is little communication.

The managers’ focus on close supervision and tasks when there is a lack of communication has negative implications. Bass and Bass (2009) note that even though job performance may improve with leaders who are more focused on goals and tasks, employee job satisfaction may suffer. Various studies indicate that absenteeism and job dissatisfaction will increase with leaders who are very task-oriented (Bass & Bass 2009; McShane & von Glinow 2010). Further, Lussier and Achua (2009) add that today's workers who are more educated, mobile, and youthful, are also unlikely to tolerate the highly directive, controlling leadership style that characterised managers of the past. Due to their training they prefer the inclusive and participative approaches to leadership. Managers who choose to ignore this only face increased employee dissatisfaction. The era of the passive follower, a legacy of the command and control system, apparently is at an end.

Other managers talked about reducing distance by building ‘rapport’, ‘connection’ and ‘close ties’ with the employees. One of the ways in which the managers sought to build closer ties with the employees was by learning the local language and culture. The other way the managers attempted to reduce distance was by ‘hanging out’ with the employees, including the occasional work lunch or dinners. The idea behind establishing closer ties with the employees was that it would not only help facilitate communication but also improve work performance and involvement. Close relations between managers and employees have been the subject of studies over the years. Hersey and Blanchard (1969) talk about the people-oriented manager as one who focuses on maintaining close personal relationships and open communication. Bass and Bass (2009) cite several studies where managers who are focused
on people are more likely to facilitate communication from their employees. That is, employees are more likely to talk when there are close relations between managers and employees. Close ties have also been linked to employee performance and involvement. Lussier and Achua (2009) cite a number of studies showing that employees who see themselves to be in a close supportive relationships with their managers are more likely to have not only higher work performance and satisfaction, but also engagement. The belief is that employees will be more likely to contribute and involve themselves at work when the managers demonstrate willingness to forge close ties and provide comprehensive support.

Invariably, close relations in collectivist cultures is also about trust. Hofstede (1984) observes that when a manager from an individualist culture wants to work in a collectivist culture, he or she will have to ‘invest’ in personal relationships of trust. One study on work relations that included employees from Norway, the United States and China (Whitener et al. 1999) finds trust to be associated with two-way communication and displays of concern and interest by management. In another study conducted in Mexico (Lindsley 1999), the results similarly indicate that employees' trust comes from close relationships with managers who show interest and concern.

In essence, close relations build trust and trust encourages work communication, cooperation and contribution. When the employees trust that the managers will look out for them and act in their best interests they will engage and commit themselves more at work. When there is no such trust, employee performance and commitment will naturally suffer (Whitener & Stahl 2004). Trust, or lack of it, is especially relevant in Vietnam. According to Thang et al. (2007) and Truong (2013), the Vietnamese people do not trust easily. They will not trust a person until they have spent a considerable period of time getting to know him or her. Close relationships, however, will go some way to mitigating this lack of trust. This means that managers need to review the importance of close relations if they want more communication and engagement from their employees.

5.6.2 Adapting versus resisting

A number of employees talked about adapting themselves to the situation. They indicated readiness to change to meet the managers’ demands. Instead of venting their frustrations at their managers for not listening to their concerns and making unreasonable demands, the employees sought to adapt or to fit in. The employees’ inclination to adapt has been referred to in the literature. Several studies support this observation. Weisz, Rothbaum and Blackburn
(1984), for instance, compared the American and Japanese views and practices on social interaction, religion, philosophy and employment. They found that members of collectivist cultures (Japanese) were more likely to change themselves to fit in, whilst members of individualist cultures (American) were more likely to change the environment around them.

The collectivist culture’s focus on fitting in invariably comes from members’ feelings of interdependence (Markus & Kitayama 1991). In a world where one is closely connected to others, it is best to adapt and accommodate to maintain good relations and harmony. The collectivist culture’s focus on fitting in and maintaining harmony in turn encourages members to embrace the obliging and compromising style to manage conflicts. Trubisky et al. (1991) compared the Taiwanese and American responses in conflict situations. Predictably, they find the former to be more likely to use an accommodating and compromising style rather than a competing style. Similarly, Onishi and Bliss (2006), in a study of managers from four Asian countries including Vietnam, find the preferred style of managing conflict is the collaborating and compromising style.

Other employees, however, talked of ‘keeping quiet and just doing what they are told’ or ‘staying as far away from their managers as possible’ when their managers failed to hear them out and imposed unreasonable demands. This approach, referred to by one employee as a ‘passive aggressive’ strategy, has also been discussed in the literature. Sastry and Ross (1998) note that the collectivist cultures’ focus on control and fitting in can be quite destructive in the long term. It can often lead to feelings of resentment and potentially negative behaviours. Continual demands placed on employees to fit in can attract considerable backlash in the longer term. Negative emotions arising from this self-imposed exercise to adapt and fit in can often persuade the employees to, as one employee puts it, ‘fight back’. Fighting back includes the employees keeping their distance from their managers, remaining indifferent to what was going on at work or just doing what they were told to do so as to keep themselves from trouble.

The employees’ attempt to fight back through the passive aggressive approach also reflects the Confucian idea of obligatory relationships and reciprocity (Yum 1988, p. 79). In essence, reciprocity refers to the idea of ‘an eye for an eye’ or ‘I scratch your back and you scratch mine’. The belief is that the employees should not be the only ones to adapt. The managers should also make similar efforts to adapt or change to the new working environment. Both managers and employees should make similar efforts to adapt and to accommodate to any
differences in opinions and ideas, and to work together towards success. One employee vividly described it this way:

\[ I \text{ move a little forward and they move a little forward and we meet in the middle. It is not I only give out } 50\% \text{ but they also give out } 50\%. \text{ So, we have to meet the middle in order to be successful. I don't want a zero sum game where one gains and the other loses. (LE 14) } \]

Any attempts on the part of the manager to ‘meet in the middle’ will invariably gain a favourable response from the employees. The reverse is also true when the managers neglect to do so. Chatman and Barsade (1995) observe that members of collectivist cultures can be cooperative when others are similarly cooperative. On the flipside, they can be as difficult, resistant and stubborn as any others when challenged.

5.6.3 Summary

Both managers and employees responded differently to what they perceived to be problems or concerns. One managerial response was close supervision. That is, when the employees did not conform to expectations, by proactively communicating with managers, the managers would impose more supervision and direction. The managers’ response has been written about in the literature. In the face of unmet performance expectations they become more task and goal oriented. As revealed by the literature, there are long-term consequences of close supervision and direction, including alienation and resistance from the employees. In essence the managers have the employees’ self-esteem to contend with. The employees are unlikely to want to be patronised or treated like children, at least not for the long term. Managers who insist on them would invariably attract backlash. The alternative for the managers is to connect with the employees. Various studies have documented the link between close relations, communication and employee engagement. Nonetheless, building close ties with employees would require greater effort and time on the part of the manager, which they may not have. Thus, managers may have to consider the cost of building good relations against its benefits.

Among employees, one response regularly mentioned was adaptation. That is, when the managers failed to listen to their concerns and opinions they learned to adapt to ensure workplace harmony. This response has also been documented by various researchers. It corresponds to the employees’ focus on fitting in and behaving appropriately. Expecting the
employees to fit in all the time, however, is not sustainable in the long term, as it can breed resentment and frustration. The other response that the employees made was keeping their distance or keeping quiet and following orders. In response to the managers’ perceived indifference to their needs and expectations, the employees countered with distance or, worse, indifference. To avoid this, the managers would do well to make reciprocal attempts to change. The onus remains on the managers to carefully listen to their employees and attend to their ideas and suggestions to avoid possible negative responses.
CHAPTER SIX - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what a sample of foreign managers and local employees perceived to be problems or concerns at work. This study builds on earlier quantitative studies that indicate that communication remains a key concern in international workplaces in HCMC, and provides greater insight into these concerns from both the managers’ and employees’ perspectives. The previous chapter discussed the themes emerging from the interviews in light of the literature. This chapter presents a discussion on the research questions presented at the start of this study and provides recommendations for theory, practice and further research. The structure of the chapter is offered in Figure 6.1.

This study began on the premise that the foreign managers had numerous concerns with regards to communication at work in HCMC. This was evidenced by several earlier quantitative studies conducted by the World Bank. Accordingly the aim of this study was to explore in depth the concerns expressed by the managers. To get a more holistic picture the employees’ concerns were similarly investigated. To facilitate this study three research questions were developed. The following is a discussion of the responses to these questions.

6.2 Research Question 1

What did the managers and employees perceive as problems or concerns when communicating at work?

In this study, both foreign managers and local employees described numerous concerns with regards to workplace communication. Their concerns were subsequently divided into the categories of work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language. Interviews with the managers revealed a vivid picture, with them being buffeted by the many demands placed on them at work by stakeholders. They expressed concerns about the idea of the empowered employee who could better support them at work. Correspondingly, attention was placed on the employees’ ability to work on their own. Consideration was also given to them contributing more to the organisation in terms of ideas and opinions. Accordingly, emphasis was placed on the employees’ ability to proactively ask questions and provide feedback. Owing to the focus on work communication, language proficiency or fluency was also highlighted.
Figure 6.1  Structure of Chapter 6

6.1 Introduction

6.2 Discussion on Research Question 1

6.3 Discussion on Research Question 2

6.4 Discussion on Research Question 3

6.5 Recommendations for practice – manager

6.6 Recommendations for practice – employee

6.7 Contribution to learning and theory

6.8 Limitations of this study

6.9 Recommendations for further research

Source: Developed for this research study
Similarly, interviews with the local employees painted a picture of them struggling to cope with the many demands placed on them at work. They raised concerns around the idea of the supportive manager who could better assist them at work. Accordingly, attention was placed on the managers’ ability to relate to them and provide close support which included help, instruction and guidance. The managers’ ability or willingness to listen to the employees concerns and opinions with understanding and respect was also highlighted. With the focus on managerial help and support, emphasis was also given to language clarity and organisation. The various concerns, however, were very much tempered by age and experience. The concerns appeared loudest with managers and employees who had little knowledge or experience of the research situation. More experienced managers and employees were less affected, as they had developed effective coping strategies.

This study highlights the very different concerns that the managers and employees had at work. These concerns in turn underlined their oftentimes conflicting expectations of each other in terms of duties to be assumed and tasks to be performed. These expectations of work roles and duties were influenced in part by their positions, and just as importantly, their cultural backgrounds and training. On the one hand were the managers who were socialised through training and education to value individuality, independence and taking action to achieve goals and objectives, and on the other, were the employees who were socialised from a young age to appreciate the interdependence that comes with a collective culture, and were therefore focused on close relations and harmony.

The results of this study correspond to findings in the literature, in which the cross cultural situation as depicted in this study has been researched extensively. The idea is that different cultures have different ideas on what makes for a good manager or a good employee. Different people would have different ideas about what managers and employees do and how they do them, including communication. These differences, if not reconciled, will be cause for disaffection and discontent. An unexpected insight is that even though the research situation has been the subject of many studies, it has been largely overlooked in practice, leading to misunderstanding, even conflicts in the workplace. As such, one of the main aims of this study was to develop strategies for the managers and their employees to address these different concerns more successfully so as to avoid any costly misunderstandings.
6.3 Research Question 2

How did they address their problems or concerns?

Failure to conform to expected roles, duties or function, including speaking up for the employees and listening for the managers, generated various coping strategies. On the part of the managers, their strategies ranged from reducing distance through building rapport and speaking Vietnamese to imposing closer supervision. On the employees’ part, their responses ranged from adapting to the managers’ demands to keeping quiet or keeping their distance from the managers. This study only revealed the importance of adhering to expected roles and behavioural norms, as failure to do so may exact rather negative consequences. For example, the employees’ failure to adhere to the managers’ expectations about asking questions and giving feedback may attract unwarranted attention and supervision from their managers, whilst the managers’ failure to conform to employees’ expectations for listening may be cause for discontent and alienation from their employees.

6.4 Research Question 3

What are the implications for practice?

To iterate, both managers and employees had very different concerns and expectations in terms of work roles, work communication, communication orientation and language. The different expectations come in part from the different positions held and from the different cultural backgrounds and training. The different expectations, if not addressed however, threaten to not only be a source of disaffection but also of costly misunderstandings.

To avoid these costly misunderstandings, it is most important that the managers and employees recognise that they may not share the same set of beliefs and expectations. That is, they may not have the same persuasion and convictions about what makes for ‘right’ or ‘proper’ work roles and work communication. To ensure effective work, the managers and employees’ may take a page from Confucian philosophy and pursue ren, yi, zhi, xin and li or kindness, honesty, wisdom, integrity and propriety. That is, both managers and employees should understand that they can be very different from each other (wisdom). Nonetheless, they still have to work together to complete their assigned tasks (integrity), which may require them to adapt or to accommodate (kindness and generosity), for that is the right and proper thing to do (propriety). One veteran manager described the situation this way: ‘In Vietnam it is
most important to understand where they [both managers and employees] are coming from and to adapt’.

The general idea is that work effectiveness is invariably predicated by the ability of the managers and the employees to understand each other and work together. Working together, in turn, may require the managers and employee to adapt or accommodate to the different beliefs and expectations of the other, or what one employee described aptly as ‘meeting in the middle’. Specifically, meeting in the middle may require the managers to focus on supporting and listening to the employees more than they are comfortable with. Conversely, meeting in the middle may call for the employees to focus on self-direction and proactive communication, which they may be unfamiliar with. In contrast, ethnocentrism, or insisting on the primacy of one’s own beliefs and expectations, is a sure way to alienate others, and to engender rivalry rather than collaboration.

Costly misunderstandings can also be avoided, when differences in beliefs and expectations are not only recognised but action be taken to encourage adaptation. For example, if the managers remained adamant that employees should be able to work alone and proactively communicate, questions should be asked about what the managers can do to facilitate this. Similarly, if the employees remained resolute on the need for close and supportive managers who listen to them, questions should be asked about how they can make that happen. These are detailed in the recommendations section below. The recommendations were gleaned from the literature and from the participants’ responses. They take into account the various issues raised in the discussions.

6.5 Recommendations for practice – managers

For managers intent on seeking employees who are able to work on their own, engage themselves and proactively communicate, the following recommendations are made.

6.5.1 Build close relationships

Consideration must be given that the employees may be wired differently. Due to their cultural orientation that emphasises group interests and interdependence, the employees may be more aligned with the fundamental need to belong than with individual self-actualisation needs (Hofstede 1984). That is, they may be more likely to work hard with close relations than with any inherent need for personal achievement or autonomy.
One overarching theme coming from the interviews with the employees is that of close relations. The employees wanted closer ties with their managers. Various studies have demonstrated that close ties are important because of their ability to build trust and facilitate communication (Bass & Bass 2009). Employees are more likely to communicate with their managers when they know and trust them. A number of studies have also shown that close relations are important because of their impact on employee commitment and involvement (Lussier & Achua 2009). Employees are more likely to return their managers’ close support and trust with engagement and involvement. This is especially true in collectivist cultures. Several studies have found that collectivist cultures such as the Vietnamese culture are much more effective when working in close knit groups. That is, they are more likely to work harder in groups that are close (Earley 1989). This means that if the managers want their employees to communicate and to involve themselves more at work, the managers must first involve themselves with their employees.

From the employees’ perspective, close relationships can be obtained by the managers showing concern or interest in the employees. Showing interest, in turn, can be demonstrated by the manager walking around and asking their employees how they are doing. Pitching in to help the employees out with the problems they face at work can also help considerably towards showing interest. Close relations can also be promoted by the managers displaying an ‘open’, ‘approachable’ attitude. Managerial openness, in turn, can be facilitated by adopting what one employee referred to as the ‘open door’ policy. That is, employees should be able walk into the manager’s office and provide feedback, contribute suggestions and engage in debate without any feelings of fear or apprehension. Managers can also show openness by spending time ‘hanging out’ with their employees after work at the local eatery and participating in the occasional wedding dinners and birthday celebrations. Attending these informal but personal events provides excellent opportunities for the managers to bond with their employees. It also provides a venue for the managers and employees to discuss work matters freely and not be constrained by protocol.

### 6.5.2 Develop skills and ability

Interviews with the employees indicate their tremendous willingness to learn and to work hard without exception. Nonetheless, a lack of skills and experience appeared to be holding them back. Working independently invariably requires employees to plan and negotiate their duties and responsibilities. Participation or involvement, in turn, requires them to be able to
articulate and persuade others about the merits of their ideas or suggestions. Communication with superiors, in particular, often requires employees to have communication skills, including language, in order to explain, clarify and ask questions. These skills do not come naturally but must be worked on.

On account of their training, the employees may not have the skills and training the managers have come to take for granted. Scott and Bannon (2008) talked about children in Western cultures being socialised from very young to work on their own and to speak up. These qualities however tend to be absent in East Asian cultures, leaving them disadvantaged in the modern workplace. Nguyen and Robinson (2010) and Trung and Swierczek (2009) refer to the local education systems’ focus on theory rather than work skills. This focus on theory often does not prepare new employees adequately to cope with the numerous demands placed on them in the modern workplace.

Accordingly, the management practice of ‘delegate and forget’ which some managers mistake for work independence, may not work here. It is akin to throwing the employees in at the deep end of the pool without a lifeline. The same authors all speak of the importance of training to bring the employees ‘up to speed’ on the skills required to succeed at work. Classroom training, however, may not suffice. Classroom training may be adequate to relay information and knowledge but may be less effective when it comes to imparting work skills. Scott and Bannon (2009) recommend on-the-job coaching as a model for training the local employee. Coaching is especially relevant in Vietnam as it involves providing support and direction (Lussier & Achua 2009), both features of the paternal leader favoured in collectivist cultures. Interviews with the employees suggest that the employees desired not only advice and guidance but also instruction and direction. Coaching these employees would go a long way towards making them more capable and more confident on the job.

Managers may also have to consider expanding their skills set to include listening. There are a number of reasons for listening. Chief among them is the high context communication style practised in East Asia that focuses on indirectness and discretion, which also requires one to be more skilled in listening. According to Adler and Rodman (2006), listening in Confucian East Asia is much more complex; it involves not only the ears but also the mind and heart. The onus falls on the manager to not only listen to what is said verbally, but also to what is said through context and non-verbal cues.
Additionally, it is not enough for managers to just listen to their employees. Managers must also demonstrate overtly that they are listening. The employees noted that they are always looking at how open and approachable the manager is to questions, feedback or suggestions. If the managers do not display openness the employees will invariably withdraw and proceed to do their jobs quietly. Tost et al. (2011) similarly observe that employee communication depends very much on their perceptions of leader openness. One good way to demonstrate openness is to follow up on feedback and suggestions from employees. Conversely, if the suggestions are not taken on board, the managers should also explain why.

Listening is particularly important when making decisions. According to Borton (2000), Risher and Stopper (2000), Thai (2005) and Zhu (2003), consultations and consensus are key to successful management and decision-making in Vietnam. Apparently, managers in Vietnam do not make decisions alone, nor do they expect their employees to fall in line when they do. Instead, managers there tend to consult their employees before making any decisions. Borton (2000) considers that this consultation and listening is less about sharing of power, than about giving respect to the employees and doing what is right.

Finally, listening enables the managers to avoid ethnocentrism. The interviews indicated that the employees were wary of managers who insisted on their own ways of doing things. The employees generally saw themselves as having to change to better adapt to the international workplace but they also want to see similar attempts to change on the part of the managers. They definitely do not want to be the only ones making changes. The Vietnamese proverb of following house rules clearly illustrates this: ‘nhap gia tuy tuc’ or ‘when you go into a house, follow the rules of that house’ (Te 1962, p. 120).

### 6.5.3 Set expectations

Managers must also ensure that their employees are fully aware of the roles or duties that they should attend to. Due to their background and training, the employees may be unfamiliar with the idea of work independence, involvement or proactive communication. These are duties and functions that were neither expected nor emphasised in employees in previously centrally planned Vietnam (Ashwill & Thai 2005). Nonetheless, they are imperative today, as they are seen to provide organisations with the necessary competitive advantage, and to provide employees with the requisite opportunities to gain recognition and advance their careers.
Managers need to attend to what Wagner and Hollenbeck (2009) refer to as the socialisation process, where employees get to learn the duties they are expected to assume, and the tasks they are expected to perform. Carefully articulating the duties and tasks right from the start will help employees to better adjust to the demands placed on them at work. For example, they need to understand what work independence really means: what it entails; what it refers to in terms of work communication; what feedback the managers expect; when and how one gives feedback; what questions should be asked; when it is appropriate to ask questions; and why asking questions is so important.

The interviews indicated that the employees were often not clear about what was expected of them. They often felt confused about what they should or should not do. On the managers’ part, they did not help matters much. They almost always assumed that the employees knew what to do. To boost employee morale and performance, it is imperative for managers to articulate clearly to the employees what they want right from the start. For the managers, taking time off to guide their employee will help them considerably. Outlining for the employees the duties they are to assume and the tasks they are to perform will ensure the employees ‘learn the ropes’ quickly to adapt and survive in the increasingly demanding workplace. The returns, in terms of employee performance and satisfaction will definitely outweigh the cost in time and expenses.

Managers also need to be aware of the roles or duties expected of them. Views on the duties and responsibilities of managers in Vietnam may be more conventional and traditional than they expect. Recent studies show the local employees’ increasing openness and expectations for work autonomy and participation (Vo & Hannif 2013). Notwithstanding, as Dickson, den Hartog and Mitchelson (2003) point out, and as evidenced in this study, in collectivist cultures such as Vietnam there is still an expectation for close support and help. For a long time, the relationship between the manager and his employee were more like the relationship between the master and his apprentice than that of the facilitator and his learner. As Yum (1988) describes it, relationships in Confucian cultures, including manager-employee, are not only close but also mutually obligatory, with both manager and employees having duties and responsibilities to attend to. This includes the managers being more hands on and not leaving the employees to their own devices. Consequently, the hands off, ‘you are on your own’ management approach may not be viewed favourably nor appreciated.
Nevertheless, the right level of supervision and direction ultimately depends on the maturity and experience of the employees. The contingency theory of leadership applies here in that different leadership styles should be applied to different people. Closer supervision and support may be needed for the newer recruits. On the other hand, more freedom should be given to the more experienced employees. Guiding the employees closely and patiently is given more impetus with the following employee remark:

_They [managers] come very demanding. It is a good thing because it brings the team to the new level. Become higher standard. But it doesn’t happen overnight you know? Yeah you know, it’s not like today we do Vietnamese auditing and tomorrow we will do the international auditing. It takes time. And you know if you don’t do it one at a time, you will receive the negative respond from the staff._ (LE4)

### 6.5.4 Reduce hierarchy

Several studies indicate that power distance discourages employees from giving feedback, asking advice and expressing opinions (See et al. 2011). Other studies suggest that power distance negatively affects initiative, including communication (Tost et al. 2011). Power distance is a relevant theme in Vietnam owing to the observance of hierarchy. One manager vividly describes the effects of power distance in the workplace in Vietnam this way:

_In Canada, if the staff are not happy, you know they are unhappy and they will tell you. With the Vietnamese, there is a range. There are the middle-aged men who are more likely to be a bit more straightforward, they think of you as sort of equal. With 20-year-old Vietnamese women, you have to draw an answer out of her._ (FM2)

As such, managers should take proactive measures to reduce power distance at work. The question is how. It starts with building and fostering close relations. Borton (2000) and Thang et al. (2007) all talk about the ability of close relations to mitigate the harmful effects of hierarchy and facilitate communication. Tost et al. (2011) in turn highlight the imperative of open communication and collegiality to reduce hierarchy. On the one hand, hierarchy naturally creates distance between managers and employees. Building relations, on the other hand, helps bridge that distance.
Reducing hierarchy may also require the managers not to direct or tell the employees what to do all the time. The employees interviewed talked about ‘sharing’ rather than ‘lecturing’ and about ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’ when being given directions to facilitate communication and collaboration. Telling the employees will only exacerbate perceived feelings of hierarchy or, as one employee puts it, create feelings of ‘different levels’ between the manager and the employee. Lecturing the employees may also cause the loss of face and feelings of disrespect. Consequently managers should refrain from just telling the employees what to do and create distance. Rather, they should revert to the more amenable form of communication of sharing with their employees and relating more closely to them.

Milliken et al. (2003), and Edmondson and Detert (2007) also mention the importance of safe places. For the employees, being able to ask questions or voice their opinions and concerns without fear of being ridiculed or reprimanded will help allay any ill feelings about hierarchy. One manager put it this way: ‘once they [the employees] know it’s a safe environment ... they will learn to argue, to state their point and to clarify issues’. Managers also need to be aware that language can both empower and disempower their employees. Generally, language affords self-assurance and confidence to those who speak it well, but only breeds apprehension and uncertainty to those who do not. Employees who do not speak the language well will fear that they will be negatively evaluated for it. On the managers’ part, they can help by not censuring employees for their language deficits.

6.6 Recommendations for practice – employees

For employees who intend on having close and supportive managers who pay attention to their concerns and opinions with respect and understanding, the following recommendations are made.

6.6.1 Focus on the task

Due consideration must be given to the fact that managers may be less motivated by the desire for good relations than by the desire to achieve goals. Managers are generally hired to achieve a goal or complete a job. As such, they may be more focused on tasks than on people and good relations. Despite this, studies have shown that a manager’s behaviour does depend on their employees’ performance (Barrow 1976). When employees’ performances are unsatisfactory, managers will be more inclined to become task-focused. And when
employees’ performances meet or exceed expectations, the managers are more likely be people-oriented. Hence, to ensure the managers remain close, supportive and people-centred, employees should work to ensure their performances meet the managers’ expectations. Failure to do so will invariably attract unwarranted attention.

According to the foreign managers, good employee work performance invariably includes regular communication. One overarching theme emerging from the interviews was that employees do not communicate enough. For the managers, communication is a means to keep tabs on what is going on at work (Giles et al. 1992). Communication is preferable to close supervision and other forms of formal control. The idea is for the managers not to check on the employees all the time, but for the employees to volunteer feedback, advice and general information to the managers.

As such, employees must always make it a point to ask questions when they are not sure of the job instructions or the approach used. The employees must also give feedback on work progress and work issues, especially work issues that may affect job delivery. Additionally, employees should articulate ideas or suggestions that may improve work performance. When there is clear and constant flow of communication, the managers will feel that they have a handle on what is going on at work. When the employees don’t communicate sufficiently the managers will feel a loss of control. When the employees persist in not communicating, the managers may be persuaded to implement other less amenable forms of control.

6.6.2 Develop ability

To succeed at the workplace, employees need to ensure that they have the requisite skill and ability to communicate. Like it or not, employees will be evaluated according to their willingness and ability to communicate. McCroskey et al. (1975) note some years back that willingness to communicate is key to work success. Those who communicate are seen as more competent, sociable and more attractive than those who don't. San Antonio (1987) refers to increased opportunities for advancement for employees who communicate well and limited prospects for those who do not.

With regard to the question of what are the requisite communication skills to succeed at work, the interviews suggest that proactive and direct communication are the most important. The managers interviewed wanted proactive communication including feedback, questions,
opinions and suggestions. The idea is the employees should anticipate and provide their managers with timely information they need to make good decisions. What is most important is that the employees should not wait for the managers to query them.

Proactive and direct communication will also ensure that the employees’ voices are heard. Adler and Rodman (2006) note the importance of coordinating communication. Essentially, effective communication requires the employees to match their communication behaviours with those of their managers or vice versa. Thus, if the managers are direct and assertive, the employee must likewise be direct and assertive. Further, Tost Gino and Larrick (2012) argue that due to perceived power distance, managers often do not listen to their employees. They will only listen to their employees if they feel that the employees have something of value to say, or it is in their best interests to do so. In this case ‘in your face,’ direct and assertive talk will certainly help the employees to get heard.

Generally, managers are not obliged to listen to their employees. There are no pre-existing rules stating that managers must attend to their employees. If the employees want the managers to listen, they need to capture their attention. Direct, assertive talk will not only help the employees capture the managers’ attention but will also get them in their managers’ good books. Various studies conducted in individualist cultures associate assertive and persuasive talk with competence, confidence and competitiveness (Kim 2002). By way of contrast, speaking quietly with downcast eyes, as employees from collectivist cultures have been taught to do in the presence of higher authorities (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil 2004), will not suffice in the modern workplace.

At the same time, employees cannot assume that the managers are as adept at listening as they are. Managers tend to be unfamiliar with indirect forms of communication and the emphasis on listening, particularly listening to context and non-verbal language. As explained earlier, employees can adapt to this by changing their communication to be more direct, assertive and persuasive. Alternatively, the employees can always educate their managers on the fine art of patient listening, although that can prove to be a considerable challenge.

6.6.3 Set expectations

Employees must understand their new roles. Today, managers demand that their employees assume greater work independence and engagement. That is, they not only want their
employees to be able to direct their own work, but the employees must also be able to actively contribute to the goings on at work. This invariably requires the employee to voice opinions, provide suggestions and discuss issues. It is no longer enough for the employees to wait on the managers and follow instructions. They must also be ready to take on roles that have traditionally been the sole preserve of the managers.

Put another way, the employee role has expanded, with greater demands being placed on the employees today. Increasingly, the role distinction between the manager and employee has become indistinguishable. As a result, the employees may need to re-evaluate the Confucian hierarchical idea that everyone has a place and position in life, and their duty is to keep to them to maintain peace and harmony. In the modern workplace, there are still hierarchies, but they are rather fluid and flexible. The focus is on results, rather than on maintaining place and position. The emphasis is on work performance and survival in the marketplace rather than observation of roles, decorum and protocol. This may require the employees to break down any preconceived notions of role boundaries.

At the same time, if employees are not ready or not comfortable with their new roles and duties, they should keep the managers informed. If they want the managers to play a more conventional role, they should clearly articulate it at the outset. The employees need to clearly outline the roles or tasks they want their managers to play right at the start. They need to consider: what they want the managers to do; how much support they want; and what kind of support they want. The employees should ask if they want more help. The general idea is ‘ask and you shall receive’. Failure to do so will invariably lead to costly misunderstanding.

6.6.4 Become aware of organisational culture

Employees should also recognise the prevailing organisational culture or the ‘the way things are done around here’ (Schneider 1988, p. 232). They are the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of the organisation. Each organisation has its own rules on what constitute good behaviours and good attitudes. These rules are often unspoken but ultimately binding on the employees. A big part of the managers’ job is to promote and enforce these rules. To succeed at work the employees need to adhere to, if not embrace, these rules. Several managers talked about organisational culture or rules of behaviour that have proven so successful that they have made the company what it is now. Rather than fighting against these rules, the employees should consider how best to work with them.
One of the areas that these rules cover is asking questions and expressing disagreements. Disagreements are never seen as dissent. Neither is asking questions seen as a challenge. Generally, disagreements and asking questions are viewed by managers as part of the process of improving task efficiency and effectiveness. Consequently, when employees neglect to ask questions and subsequently produce substandard work, they may be viewed as unreliable, even irresponsible. A quote attributed to Confucius is particularly pertinent here: ‘He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask is a fool for life’. Another area covered by the said rules is the contribution of ideas and suggestions. In the main, managers are partial to employee participation and employee involvement. In direct contrast, holding back on idea contribution may be interpreted by the managers as a lack of interest or worse, a show of indifference.

Rather than settling for employees who follow instructions, the managers wanted their employees to work with them to develop plans and implement strategies in response to issues and problems at work. The manager’s partiality to this approach is not without reason. Employee involvement is reputed to increase the quality of problem solving and decision-making (McShane & von Glinow 2010). Better quality solutions are likely to come forth when there are more heads working on problems.

Further, managers tend to associate employee involvement and participation with employee commitment. From their perspective, a more involved employee is more likely to be a more committed employee. When all the employees are involved and committed, the organisation would be better prepared to face the challenges of the marketplace. Hence, to gain more traction and recognition from their managers, employees should reassess any inhibition about talking and contributing, and participate more in the workplace.

One manager sounded a rather stern warning to employees who disregard company culture:

At our workplace, we kind of push our culture, the way we are. We forced them to follow us. We are an organisation that has been around for more than a hundred years. The culture is this. That's how we survive. Don't think that you come in and you can change the culture. I mean, I think after a while, it is a natural selection process. If they feel that they cannot fit into the culture, they will leave. So those who remain tend to deal with the situation better. (FM3)
6.7 Contribution to theory building

This study provides deeper insights into the foreign managers’ and local employees’ experiences in communication at work, shedding light on what they perceive to be issues or concerns at work. It presents a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on culture and communication at the international workplaces in HCMC, Vietnam. Whilst much research has been done on culture and communication in the Western context, few equivalent studies have been made in East Asia. Vietnam, in particular, has yet to have a comprehensive study in the subject area. Further, this study provides insights from the perspective of culture, communication and leadership. Whilst many studies have focused on either culture and leadership or culture and communication, this study provides insights into the research situation from the perspective of all three disciplines. Analysis of the data from all three disciplines affords a more holistic picture of the situation under investigation. Because the disciplines are intricately linked, neglecting one or the other would invariably diminish the results of the study.

In this study, work roles were highlighted. Both managers and employees expected the other to take on certain duties, function and responsibilities. In essence, there were certain expectations from both managers and employees on what the other should do and how they should do it. Perceptions of work roles come partly from the positions held at work and partly from the employees’ cultural backgrounds and training. Failure to conform or to comply with these perceived roles will invariably cause confusion and apprehension among the parties concerned.

In particular, the role of the empowered employee was emphasised. Various studies have reported the rise of the empowered employees in the modern workplace. Generally, the empowered employee is one who is able to work alone, take on responsibilities and make decisions (Miller et al. 2012; Yukl 2013). The belief is that empowered employees will be more motivated to work if they are given control over their work, and if they are able to obtain credit for its success. There is also the idea that the empowered employee will provide the organisation with a greater competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

At the same time, the role of the supportive manager received attention. Various studies have also highlighted the importance of the supportive leader. The supportive manager has also been referred to as one who shows concern and takes interest in their employees (Dorfman et al. 1997; House 1996). The idea is that managers should help and support their employees
until they are able to turn in credible work performances. This will not only help job performance but also employee satisfaction.

This study also highlights the idea that work roles are closely linked to work communication. That is, employee empowerment is not only about giving the employees responsibilities and opportunities to get involved at work; it is also about communication, particularly verbal communication. True autonomy only occurs when employees are able to, and are given the opportunity to discuss, clarify and negotiate work duties and responsibilities. Similarly, true involvement occurs when employees are able to explain, assert and persuade others of their ideas and suggestions, and are given the opportunity to do so. The ability to communicate effectively allows the employees to take better control of their work and better engage themselves at work. The reverse is also true, that when the employees are not able to communicate effectively due to language or cultural issues. The employees’ willingness to engage and take responsibility for work will be compromised when the ability to communicate is in question. As such, questions should be asked about what can be done to facilitate open, direct communication from the employees.

Similarly, managerial support is very much about communication, specifically listening. House (1996) and Dorfman (1998) describe the supportive leader as one who is concerned about his or her employees and communicates respect to them. This study highlights the importance of listening in communicating respect. Careful listening to the employees’ concerns and opinions will persuade the employees that the managers are interested in them. Following up on concerns will indicate respect for the employees opinions, and show that they are valuable contributing members of the organisation. Genuine interest expressed through listening is most important in East Asia as it not only connects the managers to their employees but also encourages greater employee commitment and engagement. The question arises as to what can be done to encourage more careful listening on the part of managers.

This study also underlines the idea that in East Asia especially, the relationship between the empowered employee and the supportive manager is one that is complementary rather than contradictory. That is, in order to gain the empowered employees, managers need to first provide them the necessary support. The idea is that managers need to guide and coach employees until they can truly work on their own and take more responsibility. Put another way, employee empowerment does not mean the managers get to throw the employees in at the deep end of the pool and walk away. Rather, the manager’s role is to help and support the
employee until they are able to swim at the deep end of the pool in confidence. This flies in the face of the approach of many managers who regard empowerment simply as another term for the ‘delegate and forget’ approach. If anything, employee empowerment demands greater support from managers in Vietnam. Increased support is required here, not only because the employees may lack the requisite skills that the managers often take for granted, but also because that is role or duty of the manager.

This study also emphasises how the idea of work roles can be perceived very differently. As explained earlier, roles have been described at different times and by different authors as duties or responsibilities, tasks or functions, or simply expected behaviours associated with a position (Bidell 1986). Generally, the definition of work roles has evolved over time from that of duties and responsibilities to that of activity and function. This change can be attributed in part to societal change in beliefs and values to accommodate the increasingly competitive and global society that we live in. Hofstede (2001) notes that cultural beliefs can and will change, albeit slowly, on account of a changing environment.

This study highlights the idea of work roles in East Asia as duties and responsibilities, not just functions and task. Like ‘face’ concerns, roles are taken more seriously in collectivist East Asian countries such as Vietnam. The interviews and the literature serve to reinforce this idea. Yum (1988) observes that relationships in East Asia are not relational but also mutually obligatory. That is, when in close relationships with important others, there are duties and responsibilities that cannot be dispensed with. Gannon and Newman (2001) similarly observe that whilst individualist cultures emphasise individual rights and privileges, collectivist cultures focus on duties and responsibilities. Bontempo and Rivero (1992) point out that behaviours in collectivist cultures are in the main determined by their perceptions of roles, duties and obligations rather than values and attitudes. Invariably, the focus on roles goes back to the members of collectivist cultures having strong feelings of interdependence and the emphasis on fitting in and maintaining good relations and harmony (Fiske et al. 1998).

In Vietnam, the importance of roles is reflected in several studies. For example, Ashwill and Thai (2005) cite a World Values survey study that queried the Vietnamese respondents on some of their goals in life. More than 97 percent of the respondents included ‘to make my parents proud.’ To another question on the family, nearly 100 percent thought that parents ought to be respected regardless of their qualities or their faults.
These strong feelings of duty and responsibility to the family are inevitably carried over to the workplace. Borton (2000) refers to the importance of ‘right relationships’ in the workplace. That is, managers and employees occupy a certain place or position in the organisation and therefore must attend to related duties and obligations.

The implication of roles as duties and responsibilities is significant. Pellegrini and Scandura (2008) note that for peace and harmony to prevail at work, both managers and employees must play their respective roles and duties. When one party complies with their duties and responsibilities but the other neglects theirs, disaffection, disharmony, or worse, conflict, will invariably ensue. Several of the managers talked about ‘leveraging’ and ‘harnessing’ the employees’ industry. One way to do that is to adhere to perceived roles. If the managers assume his or her roles, including that of being a supportive manager, they will be able to access a highly committed, engaged and productive set of employees. Conversely, when managers neglect their duties and responsibilities, the employees have every right to neglect theirs too.

Whilst the employees appeared to focus on duties and obligations or ‘right relationships’, they also displayed a willingness to take on new roles and duties if given the opportunity and the requisite training or coaching. A number of the employees expressed satisfaction in being able to work on their own and actively contribute to the organisation. This has similarly been observed in more recent studies. Vo and Hannif (2013), for example, observe that the local employees working in foreign joint ventures, were particularly eager and enthusiastic about being able to actively contribute to the organisation. The younger employees especially perceive autonomy and involvement as the way it should be.

This phenomenon appears to correspond to Ralston’s (2007) observations on ‘crossvergence’. That is, the employees appear to take on a mix of traditional Vietnamese and contemporary Western values, beliefs and roles. The Vietnamese employees are traditional in the sense that they still observe deeply embedded Confucian value of ‘right relationships’, but at the same time, they are ready to embrace new values and new practices to advance themselves. They are less willing to be constrained by the age-old tradition of formality, protocol and differentiated roles if it hinders their progress. For their part, managers should try to understand and manage this ‘crossvergence’.

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6.8 Limitations of the study

This research is limited to a small sample of foreign managers and local employees in seven Anglo-based organisations in HCMC. The sample was limited further by age and focus. With regards to age, the majority of the local employees interviewed were young, with only a few years’ experience working in a multinational setting. It is entirely possible that older, more experienced participants would experience work communication differently and would articulate a different set of concerns. With respect to focus, this study concentrated on managers and employees working in organisations operating in the service sector in HCMC. The focus on the service sector, however, may not necessarily reveal concerns pertinent to other sectors such as manufacturing which is increasingly driving the Vietnamese economy.

While it is acknowledged that the findings of this study are limited as to generalisability because of the small sample, the aim of this study was, rather, to facilitate in-depth analysis and discussion of individuals’ experiences of work communication, and to generate recommendations for work practices that will facilitate improved communication and performance for a group of managers and employees. Whilst generalisability was not the goal of this study, the researcher still made an effort to address the idea of transferability as put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Transferability is about how the reader can use the results of a study in a comparable situation. To achieve transferability, the researcher provided rich, thick description as advocated by Geertz (1973). Thick descriptions allow for deeper understanding that can help the reader to better transfer the results to similar situations.

Another limitation of this study is related to weak spots inherent to the qualitative research design. Qualitative studies, grounded theory studies included, are generally subject to researcher bias. The questions of what sample to use, where to get the sample and how to analyse and interpret the data collected are invariably affected by the researcher’s subjectivity. Any bias on the researcher’s part may negatively influence the results of the study. To address researcher subjectivity, the researcher undertook several mitigating measures. First, as recommended by Merriam (2009), the researcher clarified his assumptions about the research situation right at the start and continually checked on them by keeping a reflective journal.

Next, the researcher always made it a point to check with colleagues and peers who were familiar with the area of study on any pertinent findings. Finally, as prescribed by Denscombe (2010) the researcher always kept an open mind to the possibility that the data may be misinterpreted. To avoid any misinterpretation, the researcher made sure he did not neglect
any data that did not match his expectations but actively investigated possible explanations for them.

The final limitation is related to the idea of participants’ reactivity (Maxwell 2012), which refers to the idea that the participants may be directly or indirectly influenced by the researcher. The local employees interviewed on the whole were relatively youthful, and in their mid-20s. The researcher on the other hand was a good 15 to 20 years older than them. As a result of the disparity in age, the participants’ responses in the interviews may have been affected. Eckhardt (2004) notes in his studies in China that members of hierarchical cultures tend to say only what they think a person in their place and position should say. This may take the form of employees not giving critical if constructive comments to improve. To address this potential problem of participant reactivity, the researcher regularly reviewed how he might be negatively influencing the participants’ responses. Additionally, the researcher always sought to create an environment that would facilitate an honest and open discussion on the research topic. This included spending time to build rapport with the participants and avoiding any leading questions.

6.9 Recommendations for further research

This study on managers’ and employees’ experiences of communication at work suggests three directions for further research in the Asian context. First, this study only offers a glimpse into what the foreign managers and local employees, in organisations operating in the service sector in HCMC, perceived as concerns or issues when communicating at work. Additional studies, qualitative and quantitative, are needed to extend the findings of this rather small-scale exploratory work. For example, quantitative studies involving much larger samples that are focused on the accounting or the banking industry might better reveal communication issues or concerns that are more specific to the respective industries. Quantitative studies focusing on non-service sector industries such as manufacturing are also pertinent due to their increasing importance in the Vietnamese economy.

Next, this study suggests more comprehensive studies on work roles. More knowledge and understanding are needed on how managers perceive the roles of employees, and how employees understand the roles of managers, especially in the Asian context. As highlighted in this study, perception of work roles is a key factor in explaining and understanding employees’ behaviours and expectation of behaviours. Yet work roles, and in particular,
employees’ work roles, have been relatively under-researched. Gelfand, Erez and Aycan (2007) observe that perceptions of work roles in organisations frequently contribute to conflict and misunderstanding. Nonetheless, work roles have rarely been investigated, at least in comparison to Hofstede’s values and beliefs. More studies now need to pay attention to work roles when studying communication and leadership at work.

This study also suggests that more research is needed on the emerging field of upward communication in the Asian context. A constant theme from this study is the lack of communication coming from the employees. Several studies have been conducted in the United States on this phenomenon (Edmondson & Detert 2007; Milliken et al. 2003). Similar studies should be undertaken in Asia. Research on upward communication is especially pertinent in Asia. Upward communication in Asia is invariably be affected by perceptions of roles and duties. The idea is that everyone has a place and position in the organisation. With position come duties and responsibilities. Conceptions of duty, for example, may prevent employees from challenging or disagreeing with their supervisors. Employees may believe it is not their place or position to speak up to their superior. Consequently, the focus of further research could be on the where and when the lack of upward communication is most disruptive, and the extent of that disruption.

Finally, this study indicates that more research is needed on the more conventional area of downward communication. The other theme that arose from this study is the lack of listening from the foreign managers. There were constant complaints from the employees that their managers do not sufficiently listen to them. The employees’ focus on listening corresponds to the literature. Various researchers, including Samovar et al. (2003) and Yum (1988) have emphasised the importance of listening in the Confucian Asian context. Yet, this area of research has often been ignored. Previous research on cross cultural communication has mostly focused on speaking rather than listening. As a result, more quantitative and qualitative studies should be made in Asia, on when and where managers do not listen to their employees and what could be done to improve managerial listening.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule / Protocol (foreign manager)

What did the foreign managers perceived as a problem or a concern when communicating with the local employees at work in HCMC?

1. What were some of the problems, issues or concerns you had when communicating with the local employees?

2. How and why was it a concern? When and where was it a concern?

What did the foreign managers perceived to be the reasons for the concern?

3. What did you think were the reasons for your concerns?

4. What did they do or what did they not do?

What did the managers do with the concern?

5. What did you do with the concerns? How did you address the concerns?

What did the foreign managers want or expect the local employees to do to facilitate better communication at the workplace?

6. In your opinion what should local Vietnamese employees do to facilitate communications at the workplace?

7. What do you think makes for good communication at the workplace?
APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule / Protocol (local employees)

What did the local employees perceived as a problem or a concern when communicating with the foreign managers at work in HCMC?

1. What were some of the problems, issues or concerns you had when communicating with the foreign managers at work?

2. How and why was it a concern? When and where was it a concern?

What did the local employees perceived to be the reasons for the concerns?

3. What did you think were the reasons for your concerns?

4. What did they do or what did they not do?

What did the local employees do with the concern?

5. What did you do with the concerns? How did you address your concerns?

What did the local employees want or expect the managers to do to facilitate better communication at the workplace?

6. In your opinion what should the foreign managers do to improve communications at the workplace?

7. What do you think makes for good communication at the workplace?
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

Title of research project: Communication at the international workplaces in HCMC

Name of researcher: Adrian Wee Tiong Weng

Name of Supervisor: KJ John

(Contact details of the researcher and the supervisor are contained in the information sheet about this research)

NOTE: This consent form will remain with the Southern Cross University researcher for their records.

Tick the box that applies, sign and date and give to the researcher

I agree to take part in the Southern Cross University research project specified above.  Yes  No

I have been provided with information at my level of comprehension about the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences and possible outcomes of this research, including any likelihood and form of publication of results.

No

I agree to be interviewed by the researcher  Yes  No

I agree to allow the interview to be audio-taped  Yes  No

I agree to make myself available for further interview if required  Yes  No
I agree to complete questionnaires asking me about local culture

I understand that my participation is voluntary

I understand that I can choose not to participate in part or all of this research at any time, without negative consequence to me

I understand that any information that may identify me, will be de-identified at the time of analysis of any data. Therefore, any information that I have provided cannot be linked to me (Privacy Act 1988 Cth)

I understand that neither my name nor any identifying information will be disclosed or published

I understand that all information gathered in this research is confidential. It will be kept securely and confidentially for 7 years at the University

I am aware that I can contact the supervisor or researcher at any time with any queries

I understand that the ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee

If I have concerns about the ethical conduct of this research, I understand that I can contact the SCU Ethics Complaints Officer

Participants name: _____________________________________________________

Participants signature: ...............................................................................

Date: ______________________

Please tick this box and provide your email address below if you wish to receive a summary of the results:

Email: __________________________________________________________________

**Contact details** for the ethics offices are:

HREC Secretary

HRESC Tweed Heads/GC
INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Adrian Wee Tiong Weng and I am conducting research as part of my doctoral degree in Business Administration at Southern Cross University. I am working with Dr. KJ John to do a study on 'Communication at the international workplaces in HCMC'

A major part of this research is collecting information from expatriate managers and local employees who work in for foreign companies in Ho Chi Minh City. You are invited to participate in this research project to study Vietnamese cultural influences on business communication. You were selected as a possible participant because of your knowledge and experience of the topic. The results of this study will help improve communication and understanding between foreign managers and Vietnamese employees. Further this understanding may translate to management practices and processes better suited to the environment in HCMC.

Please read this information sheet and do ask any question you may have before accepting this invitation.

Background information
The purpose of this research is to study business communication between foreign managers and their local employees in HCMC. We will focus on the influence of Vietnamese culture on communication. We will also look at the challenges of this cross cultural communication, possible causes for the challenges and what can we do about them.
**Procedures**
If you agree to the study, you will be asked to fill in the consent form, attend a personal interview and complete a questionnaire. The interview will be for an hour and will be conducted in English or Vietnamese depending on your preference. The interview will be recorded and transcribed for academic purpose. The questionnaire will be bilingual (English and Vietnamese) and will take 30 minutes to complete.

**Confidentiality**
Rest assured that your answers to the interview questions and the questionnaire will be kept completely confidential. All completed questionnaires, recordings and interview transcripts will be kept under lock and key in the researchers premise. They will only be made available to you upon request. The records will be kept for a minimum of 7 years before being destroyed. Further to ensure your anonymity, only pseudonyms will be used. You will not be identified by name on data collected in the research, or in my doctoral thesis, research reports, presentations and publications that will come from the research.

**Voluntary nature of the study and compensation**
Please take note that your participation is strictly voluntary. There are no financial incentives or costs, apart from time, for taking part in this research. But by deciding to participate in this study you will have made a direct contribution to the assessment of Vietnamese culture and their influence on communication.

**Feedback**
The results from this study will form part of my doctoral thesis that will be available at the SCU library at a later date. If you want a summary of the results, please leave your email address on the attached consent form. The results of the study will be forwarded to you once the study has been completed.

**Risk of being in the study**
There are no risks for participating in this study. Once you participate, you may refuse to answer any question you consider invasive or stressful. Additionally, you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.

I will contact you to inquire of your decision to participate in this study. In the meantime if you have questions or concerns about being in this study you may call me at +0084 909609764 or email me at Adrianwee@mail.com

Thank you for taking time to consider this invitation. We hope that you will be able to help us in this very important study.

**Adrian Wee**
Doctoral Candidate
Southern Cross University

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*The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee. The approval number is ECN-09-133. If you have any complaints*
or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Ethics Complaint Officer, Ms. S. Kelly, (telephone (02) 66209139, fax (02) 66269145, email: skelly@scu.edu.au)

Any complaints you make will be treated in confidence and you will be informed of the outcome.

Southern Cross UNIVERSITY
A new way to think

APPENDIX E

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC)
NOTIFICATION

To: Dr K J John/Adrian Wee
Graduate College of Management
adrianwee@mail.com,kjjohn@ohmsi.net

From: Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee
Division of Research, R. Block

Date: 22 October 2009

Project: The influence of Vietnamese culture on business communication in foreign companies in HCMC.

Approval Number ECN-09-133

The Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee has established, in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research –
Section 5/Processes of Research Governance and Ethical Review, a procedure for expedited review by a delegated authority.

This application was considered by the HRESC, Tweed/Gold Coast campus.

This research is approved and you may commence your research.

The approval is subject to the mandatory standard conditions of approval. Please note these and inform the HREC when the project is completed or if there are any changes of protocol.

This approval will be ratified by the full Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at its November meeting. If the full HREC has any further queries, the researchers are expected to respond to those queries.

Standard Conditions in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Statement) (NS).

1. Monitoring

NS 5.5.1 – 5.5.10
Responsibility for ensuring that research is reliably monitored lies with the institution under which the research is conducted. Mechanisms for monitoring can include:

(a) reports from researchers;
(b) reports from independent agencies (such as a data and safety monitoring board);
(c) review of adverse event reports;
(d) random inspections of research sites, data, or consent documentation; and
(e) interviews with research participants or other forms of feedback from them.

The following should be noted:

(a) All ethics approvals are valid for 12 months unless specified otherwise. If research is continuing after 12 months, then the ethics approval MUST be renewed. Complete the Annual Report/Renewal form and send to the Secretary of the HREC.

(b) NS 5.5.5
Generally, the researcher/s provide a report every 12 months on the progress to date or outcome in the case of completed research specifically including:

- The maintenance and security of the records.
- Compliance with the approved proposal
- Compliance with any conditions of approval.
- Any changes of protocol to the research.

Note: Compliance to the reporting is mandatory to the approval of this research.
(c) Specifically, that the researchers report immediately and notify the HREC, in writing, for approval of any change in protocol. NS 5.5.3

(d) That a report is sent to HREC when the project has been completed.

(e) That the researchers report immediately any circumstance that might affect ethical acceptance of the research protocol. NS 5.5.3

(f) That the researchers report immediately any serious adverse events/effects on participants. NS 5.5.3

2. Research conducted overseas
   NS 4.8.1 – 4.8.21
   That, if research is conducted in a country other than Australia, all research protocols for that country are followed ethically and with appropriate cultural sensitivity.

3. Complaints
   NS 5.6.1 – 5.6.7
   Institutions may receive complaints about researchers or the conduct of research, or about the conduct of a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) or other review body.

   Complaints may be made by participants, researchers, staff of institutions, or others. All complaints should be handled promptly and sensitively.

   Complaints about the ethical conduct of this research should be addressed in writing to the following:

   Ethics Complaints Officer
   HREC
   Southern Cross University
   PO Box 157
   Lismore, NSW, 2480
   Email: sue.kelly@scu.edu.au

   All complaints are investigated fully and according to due process under the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and this University. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and you will be informed of the outcome.

   All participants in research conducted by Southern Cross University should be advised of the above procedure and be given a copy of the contact details for the Complaints Officer. They should also be aware of the ethics approval number issued by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

Sue Kelly
Secretary HREC
Ph: +61 +2 6626 9139
sue.kelly@scu.edu.au

Professor Bill Boyd
Chair, HREC
Ph: (02) 6620 3569
william.boyd@scu.edu.au